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SCIENCE STORIES

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SCIENCE STORIES

ISSUE NO. 1

**HOCUS
POCUS
UNIVERSE**
By Jack
Williamson



The People Who Write **SCIENCE STORIES**



JACK WILLIAMSON

One day last fall I had a pleasant surprise. A letter from Bea Mahaffey. She enclosed a photostat of a Bok cover painting and asked me to write a story about it. One story idea in my files seemed to fit the picture. It was one that I had reluctantly decided to shelve because it seemed a little too far off-trail. But I've known Ray Palmer since the days when we were both trying to break into the old Gernsback **AMAZING STORIES**, and it occurred to me that he has a healthy irreverence for scientific orthodoxies. I decided to write the story; it was fun, for a change, to see science come off second best.

As for the vital statistics: I was born in an Arizona mining town, in

1908, and spent most of my boyhood on isolated southwestern ranches. When I discovered science fiction, it was an exciting new world. Hugo Gernsback bought my first story in 1928. I've been writing ever since—with three years out for World War II, when I served as a weather forecaster in the southwest Pacific.

After the war, I came back to the county-seat town of Portales, New Mexico, served a short hitch as wire editor on the daily paper, and married Blanche—whom I've known since we were in the sixth grade together. She hadn't waited for me the first time; consequently we now have a son who is a Navy frogman, a married daughter, and two grandchil-

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SCIENCE STORIES

Issue No. 1

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....Editorial...

WATER boils at 212° F. at sea level. That is a scientific fact. Now, let's write some science fiction based on that fact. Let's extrapolate (the new five-dollar word we old-time science fiction fans were too dumb to use when we argued about how to define science fiction). But before we begin, we want to warn possible critics that *we believe the fiction we are about to write is not fiction at all, but tomorrow's fact!* We have the utmost faith in our extrapolation. We consider it to be even more than extrapolation—we might even call it prophecy . . . much better prophecy than Nostradamus, that old faker, with his gobbledegook, ever spouted from his Frenchman's Flat(head). There is a great difference between being mysterious and claiming a secret power given only to a few as the basis for our predicting, and extrapolating ala science fiction. The latter is the real stuff, kiddies! So, what we are about to write is unassailable logic and reason, based on laboratory proof; and no "stuff of which dreams are made." Thus, if you are a Ph. D., and wish to take issue with us, you had better offer more than a diploma to back us down!

Water boils at 212° F. at sea

level. But high in the Andes mountains it boils at a *lower* temperature. If we take the water up in a weather balloon to even greater heights, we discover that the boiling point becomes constantly lower. We feel reasonably sure, then, judging from the orderly and provable progression we have already noted, the process of boiling at lower and lower temperatures continues the further away from Earth's center we go.

Now, what does that point to? (No, not a preposition ending a sentence!) It points to an altitude where water *cannot exist except as a gas*. In short, it has all "boiled away." Why is this? There has been a theory advanced to account for it. Just a theory, not a proved fact. We (we admit no relationship to this *particular* pronoun) say that it is because water boils at a lower temperature at reduced atmospheric pressure. But why not stick to *facts*? Why just *assume*? Why not say only what we *know*—that the *higher* we go, the lower the boiling temperature? Location merely, not pressure. Speaking literally, since there is no such thing as "up" in relation to a sphere floating in space, our location is merely away (in any direction) from the center of the sphere.

Speaking in round terms, in miles, we can say that at a distance of 4,000 miles from the Earth's center water boils at 212°F . We can say that at a distance of 4,002 miles it boils at 208°F . (This is not the actual figure—you can find it out by experiment if you wish to be a true scientist, and not take our word, which in this case is false.)

Let's go up to that location away from Earth (maybe it's 5,098 miles from the center) where water insists on being totally boiled away, i.e., is a gas. It is, specifically, hydrogen (two parts) and oxygen (one part). Two gases. Let's extrapolate that the temperature at which this occurs is "absolute zero." Now, we begin to extrapolate in earnest—we decide to go out much further from Earth's center. We go out to 50,000 miles. And because we've faithfully followed a "progression," beginning with our initial progression from sea level to Andes mountain height, we go right on postulating a progression. But now we have no water to work with, only two gases. One is composed of atoms as simple as we can get them, another a little more complex. Electrons and protons. Let's "boil" our atoms. Let's cause them to refuse, just as did the water, to remain hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and simply become free electrons and protons. What have we done with our extrapolated progression? We've annihilated the water altogether!

We've made (for lack of a better term) non matter out of matter. We converted it to "energy." We have increased the *motion* of the molecules of water constantly, through higher rates, to particles of gas, to "masses" of protons and electrons. Maybe we could even break it down further into sub-atomic particles. Maybe even into quanta. But let's not go too far away from Earth. No need to, in this particular bit of science fiction (for we have a plot in mind which we intend developing into an exciting story of adventure—and also, a new philosophy, sugar-coated to make it palatable).

Contrarily, let's descend *into* the Earth. Let's go down quite a few miles, beneath the granite crust of the Earth, into the area of red-hot magma. Maybe later, we'll even go down into the molten core (which isn't molten at all—and we'll extrapolate why in a few moments). No water down here, but let's take iron. Or, first, basalt. We find it to be solid rock, which, because it is so hot, is molten. Pressure, we say (again the pronoun isn't personal) keeps it a solid. It isn't even a liquid, although it is hot enough. And the iron core. It, too, is tremendously hot. Hot enough to be a gas! But it isn't. Pressure. We begin to suspect now, that there is something wrong with our word temperature. Our progression isn't consistent any more. It doesn't agree with the meagre facts we

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Hocus-Pocus Universe

By Jack Williamson

Into the world of facts and figures, scientists and soldiers, came Eon Hunter. Eon the misfit, with his stubborn refusal to accept the world as it was; Eon the enigmatic, who always returned to involve himself in Guilborn's life.

Illustration by Hannes Bok

Carol spoke only to tease me, I'm sure.

She was taking my general science course just because she needed a science credit to get her high school diploma; she didn't aspire to become another Madam Curie. Her grades were good enough, but she had more exciting goals. She was seventeen, and just discovering the dark witchcraft of sex.

That was my first year out of college, and I was only five years older. Though I was trying hard to keep the unwritten commandment that teachers shall not have love affairs with their students, she surely knew how deeply she disturbed me.

We were setting up the apparatus for a classroom experiment—a spring gun mounted to shoot a steel ball at a falling weight. I was still too serious about my own small scientific attain-

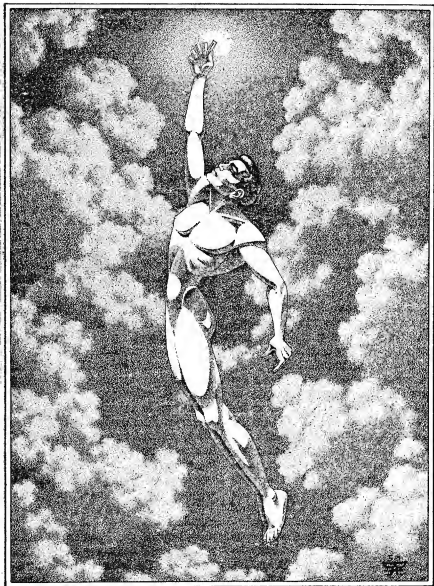
ments, and I had announced with an unwise solemnity that we were about to demonstrate the universal force of gravitation.

"This magnet drops the weight, as the shot leaves the gun," I had explained, with far too much assurance. "The gun is level. The shot and the weight both move in the same vertical plane. They're both subject to the same gravitational acceleration, which will keep them both in the same horizontal plane. Therefore, no matter what the range is, or how hard we fire the shot, it will always hit the weight."

"Really, Mr. Guilborn?" Bright mischief was shining in Carol's eyes. "I don't believe it!"

"Do you think Newton's laws have been repealed?"

That was a rash question, and Eon Hunter seized it at once. He was a



lean, gangling, ungainly youth, a year or two older than Carol. I had been feeling a little sorry for him, because he was so obviously and hopelessly in love with her.

"Why not?" he demanded. "Doesn't everything change?"

His voice was low and serious, almost as if he really meant to challenge Newton, but I saw a quiver of restrained amusement at the corner of Carol's mouth, and heard a stifled titter from the other members of the class.

"We have arranged this experiment to let the laws of nature speak for themselves," I answered hastily. "If the shot does hit the weight, we'll know that the law of gravity is still on the job."

"But it won't," Hunter said.

I looked at him sharply, wondering for the nth time what made him tick. He had been a puzzle to me, and often an exasperation, ever since the first day of school. He was easily my worst student. Yet I knew he wasn't stupid, and I had begun to feel irked at my own failure to interest him in science. He spent the class periods staring vacantly at nothing or filling his notebook with sketches of Carol Wakeman's pretty face. Even his personal appearance annoyed me. He slouched. His hair needed cutting. His shirts were seldom clean. I couldn't understand the fond glow in Carol's eyes when she looked at him—or why he now sat stubbornly shaking his head, as if he really expected the experiment to fail.

"If gravity has quit," I told the class, "you had better hold on to your seats."

Nobody smiled. Hunter straightened at his desk, staring at the suspended weight with a curious defiance in his brooding dark eyes, and I saw that the others had caught his sullen skepticism. Unbelief was vibrant in the room. Even Carol's mischievous eyes had turned grave with doubt.

For a moment I almost lost my temper.

"Hunter is trying to challenge the basic facts of science," I said, too sharply. "But we needn't talk about the question he has raised. Our experiment will pass it on to nature." I pulled back the plunger of the little spring gun. "Just watch the answer."

I released the plunger. The weight dropped. The steel ball flew toward it—and missed.

Somebody tittered.

"Too bad, Mr. Guilborn." Carol was laughing at me. "It looks like Eon is actually repealing your precious laws of nature."

Her laughter made the failure look like a personal victory for Hunter. I was unreasonably upset. I felt my face turning red, and I swung quickly away from the class to replace the weight and pick up the shot.

"I don't think Hunter has really thrown any monkey wrench into the machinery of the universe," I said, when I could trust my voice again. "I imagine the failure was due to another law of science, that I had almost forgotten. It is called Casey's

law. It applies to all scientific experiments. It states that everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Perhaps the gun isn't quite level, or not quite in line."

I checked the position of the gun, and tried again. Another miss. A rising titter swept the class. I checked the circuit that dropped the weight. There was nothing wrong that I could discover, but the shot kept missing. I was trembling with a futile exasperation, before the bell rang.

Most of the students seemed merely amused at my misfortune, as they filed out of the room, but Hunter's gaunt face wore an awed elation. He paused silently to look at the apparatus, and then marched solemnly on as if lifted up with the secret awareness of some irresistible power.

Carol stopped at my desk.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Guilborn. I didn't intend to embarrass you."

She smiled, and I forgave her everything.

"And, please don't stay mad at Eon."

"I'm trying not to be angry," I told her. "But I certainly don't understand him."

"Nobody does." Her voice softened tenderly. "But I like him anyhow."

When she was gone, I hooked up the weight and the gun one more time in the very same way and repeated the experiment. The prompting of the shot against the falling weight assured me that Newton's laws were once more in force. I resolved to forget my chagrin and try

to understand Eon Hunter.

That was hard to do, but he caused me no more trouble in class. Next day he sat sprawled as idly as usual in his seat, staring out of the window at the gaudy colors of fall on the hills around Picton, seeming to hear nothing I said. It seemed wiser not to disturb him.

A few weeks later, I called at his home. He had just failed the midterm examinations in nearly all his subjects. I thought that his lack of attention and effort might be due to some personal difficulty that I could help him solve. Secretly, too, I must have been still hoping to discover how he had managed to defy the law of gravity.

My landlady told me where he lived, and supplied a gossip history of his parents.

"They've come down in the world so far it nearly kills 'em," she said. "Lucinda Hunter's from somewhere in the South. Never had a penny, as far as I know, but she can't get over all the slaves and plantations her people owned a hundred years ago, before the Civil War. She thinks she's a little too good to mix with us common folks, here in Picton."

"And what about Eon's father?"

"A good enough match for her, I guess. Old Caleb Hunter's grandpa was one of the first pioneers to stake out his claim in the Picton Valley. When I first remember Caleb, his pa was still well to do, with the biggest store in town and a fine house on Broad Street. He's nothing but a bookkeeper now, in the store his dad-

dy used to own."

Broad Street was blighted now, with the fine old homes sagging into decay. A dead tree spread its whitened limbs over a yard of dead weeds beside the old Hunter house. The rotten shutters had fallen apart, and the front porch groaned alarmingly under my feet.

Eon's father came to the door in a soiled kitchen apron, with a dishrag in his hand. He was a tired little man, with a pinched red face and a feeble smile of false optimism. I caught a whiff of whisky on his breath. He gave me a damp, limp hand, and took me back into the gloomy old living room.

"Ma!" he called, with a hollow heartiness. "Look who's here! The science teacher Eon was telling us about."

I didn't ask what Eon had told.

Lucinda Hunter sat in a wheel chair, reading a tattered magazine. Her thin body was hunched with arthritis. Her hands were painfully swollen and twisted. Only her face seemed unmarked with suffering. She looked up at me with a vague fleeting smile, like that of a happy child unwilling to be drawn from some exciting private game.

I asked about Eon.

"He said he was going for a walk," she told me. "The trees are so pretty, this time of year. If I could only get out—"

She shrugged stiffly, with a faint smile of sweet resignation.

"The boy's always hiking off, all by himself," Caleb Hunter added.

"Sometimes out till midnight. Just walking and thinking, he says. I don't know where he goes, or what he finds to think about."

That looked like the opening I wanted.

"I'm worried about him," I said. "He's not attentive in class. I'm afraid he isn't trying—"

"Why should he try?" Hunter's voice sharpened. "What can he look forward to, in times like these?"

"These times aren't really so bad for young people who accept them realistically," I protested. "I don't think many things are actually impossible to a young man like Eon, if he's only willing to make the necessary effort. You are doing him a serious wrong, if you deny him hope."

"Hope?" The worn little bookkeeper gestured with the greasy dishrag, as if erasing hope. "He'll be drafted next year. If he gets home all in one piece, he'll have to drudge the rest of his life away at some dull two-bit job. He hasn't got a chance."

I tried to tell him that Eon could surely find or create some opportunity to do whatever he wanted, but his black pessimism made my words sound like empty platitudes. I turned to Lucinda Hunter.

"I'm only trying to help your son find himself," I told her. "Doesn't he have some gift? Some special interest that we can help him find and cultivate?"

"Eon has many talents." Her smooth face reddened, as if I had stung her pride. "More than you can imagine." She moved her head stiffly

to look at her husband. "Show Mr. Guilborn Eon's paintings."

Caleb Hunter took me upstairs to Eon's room. Books were stacked on the unmade bed. They were piled on the rickety desk, and scattered among odds and ends of soiled clothing across the dusty floor. A thin reek of turpentine and linseed oil met us at the door, and I saw a covered easel placed where it would catch the north light from the window.

I paused to glance at Eon's books. Tattered old volumes of Sir Walter Scott, that must have come down from his mother's Southern family. Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe. Shakespeare, Browning, Keats. Classics. But nothing that could have taught him how to suspend the laws of motion.

"Always got his nose buried in some moldy old book." His father sniffed. "He can't afford the new ones, but mostly he's happy enough with these. Till he gets his moody spells."

He was gathering up books and muddy shoes and tubes of drying paint, so that we could reach the easel. I asked if Eon had taken art lessons.

"Only from his mother. She used to paint, before her hands got so bad. Did illustrations for children's books. She taught him a lot, before he got so discouraged."

He reached for the cover, and suddenly paused.

"But he never showed her this one. He's—well, funny about it. He always turned it to the wall, when I

came in and found him working on it. So don't let on you ever saw it."

He uncovered the painting.

"Oh!" I had to catch my breath, because it was so completely unexpected. A lovely girl sat on a rock in the foreground of a fantastic prehistoric landscape, feeding flowers to a hideous reptile.

"Well?" Hunter's small bloodshot eyes were almost apprehensively intent. "What about it?"

Ordinarily, I preferred the abstract paintings that seemed to reflect the mathematical abstractions of science and the clean geometry of modern machines. Eon's fantasy seemed illogical and unscientific. The great reptiles were all extinct, I knew, many million years before the human race evolved. I thought the smiling girl should logically have been afraid of that many-fanged beast. I felt that I shouldn't like the picture at all.

Yet it caught hold of me, with its reckless mood of pure romance. My common sense struggled against the spell of fantastic gayety it cast over me, and surrendered to something stronger than fact or logic. Suddenly I wanted to deny all the uncomfortable realities I knew, and escape the drab world around me to join that happy girl in her enchanted universe.

"It's beautiful!" I told Hunter. "I don't pretend to know what it means. And of course I'm no critic. But I think it's wonderfully done. Amazing, to be the work of a high school boy. Eon certainly ought to go ahead with his painting."

Caleb Hunter seemed somehow dis-

pleased at my enthusiasm.

"Go ahead?" His nasal voice lifted sharply. "You don't know how crazy he is, about this picture. He says it came to him one night in a dream. He worked on it for months, getting it just the way he wanted it. Now he says he's got nothing else to paint."

He moved impatiently to replace the cover over the painting, but I caught his arm to stop him. I wanted to look at the girl again. She was nude, except for a wreath of the same strange flowers she was feeding into the snarling monster. Her face and figure were idealized, but I had recognized her.

"Did Carol—" Something choked me. "Did Carol Wakeman pose for this?"

"I wouldn't think so!" Caleb Hunter seemed somewhat shocked. "A nice girl like her. Not here in a nice quiet little town like Picton." He backed away from the picture, squinting at it. "But since you say so, it does look like her. If she was a few years older, and—well, undressed like that."

"No matter," I muttered. "It's really no business of mine."

Yet I felt numb and cold with loss, as if Eon had somehow taken Carol out of my reach forever, beyond logic and reality, to that luminous dream-world of his painting.

"That's her, all right." Hunter squinted again, and scowled disapprovingly. "Maybe she did pose for him. They've been in love for years. Such a pity, for Eon."

"Why?" I wrenched my attention from the painting. "Why shouldn't they be in love?"

"What good can ever come of it?" Hunter shrugged hopelessly. "You know how it is, with kids their age. Eon hasn't got a dime. We couldn't spare a cent to help 'em get a start. Anyhow, he'll soon be drafted. In four or five years, maybe, if he happens to get back alive—" He interrupted himself, with a tired little gesture of bitter futility. "But he won't ask her to wait. He says it wouldn't be fair to her."

"Maybe that's the difficulty I was looking for." I nodded. "If Eon feels that way—"

"Shhh!" Hunter lifted his hand, and I heard the old stairs creaking. "That's Eon!"

He moved with a guilty haste to cover the painting, but he was too late. Eon burst into the room, snatched the cover, and flung it over the easel.

"Don't—" The boy was white and gasping with an unaccountable fury. "Don't show that to anybody!"

Caleb Hunter cringed away.

"Now, son," he protested weakly. "Don't get mad. Mr. Guilborn came just to try and help you—"

"I don't want help," Eon snapped. "Just leave me be!"

"I didn't intend to intrude," I said clumsily. "But I can see that you must be struggling with some personal problem. I was hoping—"

"You stick to your precious science," he broke in hoarsely. "I'll take care of my own affairs."

His father and I retreated. He slammed the door behind us, but I had seen the tears welling into his tortured eyes. The sound of his sobbing followed us down the stairs. His father let me out, with a whispering apology.

That strange outburst left me deeper than ever in the dark about Eon and his secret difficulties. He came to my office before class next day, and told me stiffly that he was sorry. That was all. He didn't offer to explain anything, and his sullen reserve made it clear that he would tolerate neither questions nor sympathy.

His moody spells were darker and more frequent, as the term went on. He sat brooding through my lectures, as if his mind were a million miles away—or sixty million years, perhaps, in that prehistoric world where he had painted Carol.

He kept failing. I began to suspect that he was near the breaking point in his own lonely struggle.

I wanted to help him—partly, perhaps, to atone for the jealousy that I could never quite escape—but I didn't know how.

When the spring term began, he didn't come back to school. Carol told me that he had been rejected for the draft. She said he was looking for a job, and soon I saw him driving a delivery truck for the department store where his father worked.

Carol seemed as deeply bewildered and distressed about him as his parents had been, when I talked to her. She was having occasional dates

with him, she told me, but he must have been a pretty grim companion.

In spite of all Mr. Baxter's hints that teachers and students must not allow themselves to become too intimate, I was seeing a good deal of Carol. Her home was near my boarding house, and I began timing myself to walk with her or pick her up in my old car on the way to school and back. Sometimes we stopped for a Coke. For her part, she began coming into my office to ask about science problems that I knew she already understood. She no longer questioned the law of gravity, even to tease me.

One spring day when we were alone in my office, I started impulsively to tell her how much I was coming to love her. She seemed pleased, but disturbed. Her face colored deeply, and she caught quickly at my arm to stop me. I felt her fingers trembling.

"Wait, Charles!" Her level eyes looked into mine, turning slowly bright with tears. "I like you, too. An awful lot. But I've got to tell you —" She stopped to catch her breath. "I'm engaged to Eon."

"Oh!" I stammered lamely that I wished them happiness. "And when is the wedding?"

"I don't know, Charles." Her voice was choked with trouble. "We had planned it for right after graduation. Eon got this job, and my folks promised to help us. But then something happened."

She stood silent for a moment, looking pale and miserable.

"Something horrible!" she went on with a rush. "Eon's mother somehow

got out of her wheel chair and up into his room. She found a painting of his, that I had posed for. It upset her terribly. She tore the canvas to shreds. And then she must have had some kind of stroke. She was lying moaning on the floor when Eon came in. She seems terribly jealous of me now, and Eon says we'll just have to wait till she gets over it."

"You're crazy, if you wait for Eon." I had forgotten Mr. Baxter's commandment. "I do love you, Carol. I want you to be happy. But I don't think you could be, with him. He's too much like his parents. They aren't—well, normal. They can't take the world as it is. They're all living back in the past. Or somewhere else—"

I broke off, wondering suddenly about that prehistoric landscape where Eon had painted Carol. If he refused so stubbornly to accept the hard facts of science, where had he got his dinosaurs?

"Eon is different from other people," Carol agreed quietly. "Because he's a genius. A real genius! He'll do something tremendous, if he ever finds himself—though maybe not in painting or literature. But he hasn't found himself yet. He's terribly unhappy. He needs me, Charley. He says he needs me desperately. I'm sure I love him—though he sometimes seems so strange!"

Until then, I hadn't realized how deeply I had let my emotions get involved with Carol and her peculiar genius. I didn't sleep that night. By morning, I had decided to leave Picton and look for other interests.

I found them.

When school was out, I said good-bye to Carol as casually as I could, and went back to the university to finish my graduate work. One of my professors was the great Dr. Zerlinger. He introduced me to the mystery and drama of research. He let me help with some of his own exciting work in atomic fusion, and the summer after I received my own doctorate, he took me with him to the hush-hush conference where Project Lightyear was launched.

The secret invitations had come from the White House, and our host was Dr. Milford Draven, the distinguished physicist who was then the President's special assistant in matters involving science. We met at a resort hotel in Florida, behind a screen of plainclothes guards. General "Buster" Barlow and his staff; a team of State Department experts; a few picked industrial executives; two dozen of the top American scientists.

Nobody seemed to know why we were there, and the rumors seemed fantastic then. General Barlow was a restless little bundle of steel and dynamite. He rechecked our identifications, pinned badges on us, and indoctrinated us in the military security regulations, with a cold-eyed efficiency that quenched all nonsense. When we were all assembled in the hotel ballroom, Dr. Draven rose to speak.

"Perhaps you have been amused at this cloak-and-dagger atmosphere."

He was a frail old man leaning on a cane, and it was hard where I was seated to catch his halting words. "You won't be amused, when you see why it's necessary. The facts are simple—and frightening. Our country is in danger. Your job is to save it."

He paused to mop at his haggard face—the room was not air conditioned, and the summer heat was oppressive.

"The President regrets that he is unable to be here himself," Draven went on. "His message to you is that he is placing the safety of the nation in your hands. Now we shall begin our consideration of this very grave crisis, with reports from the departments of State and Defense."

A whole panel of experts briefed us. An intelligence officer told us that a long series of trans-oceanic rockets, carrying atomic war heads, had been tested in Siberia—upon inhabited towns. The puppets of the Kremlin were pushing forward everywhere. The cold war was thawing fast.

With a hot war in prospect, General Barlow informed us, our own weapons were sadly inadequate. We had nothing fast enough to intercept those atomic rockets. A strong offense was the only possible defense, but even there we were dangerously unguarded.

"We do have adequate stockpiles of nuclear weapons in all types," the general said. "Unfortunately, as things stand now, we can't deliver them. Our aircraft can be intercepted. Even our newest rocket missiles lack

the necessary range. As things stand today, we are helpless in the face of the enemy."

Buster Barlow and his officers sat down. Dr. Draven limped back to the platform and cleared his ancient throat.

"That's our problem, gentlemen," his old voice quavered. "As scientists, you must already see what answer we must find. We must have atomic power to deliver our own atomic missiles and to intercept the enemy's—"

"We have atomic power," somebody put in.

Draven shook his cadaverous head.

"Unfortunately, our crude atomic heat engines, designed to run aircraft and surface craft and submarines, have all turned out to be short steps in the wrong direction. They all waste atomic energy to heat air jets or to generate steam. It must be applied directly."

He gestured feebly to silence a mutter of protest.

"You have been called together as a scientific team, working directly under the President in this grave national crisis, to design and develop a true nucleonic power plant."

"Impossible!"

Half a dozen atomic scientists and rocket engineers were on their feet, clamoring to say why true atomic rockets could never be built. The best possible rocket motors burned out fast enough in the feeble heat of ordinary chemical fuels. No conceivable motor could contain and control nuclear fuels, reacting at a hundred million degrees.

"You might as well ask us to build a ship out of water or a gun out of gunpowder." Dr. Zerlinger summed up the arguments, wryly. "The known principles of science state that it can't be done."

"It must be done," General Barlow answered with a bleak authority, as if he were ordering us to storm some enemy hill. "If you can't do it with any known principles of science, then you'll have to invent some new ones."

I suppose, in a way of speaking, that is precisely what we did. The conference had dragged on for days. Every hopeful suggestion had been promptly demolished, until one dreary morning, after another sleepless night, when I was sitting with Dr. Zerlinger in the guarded dining room. We were both groggy with fatigue and nicotine, and I was saying that we ought to give it up and turn in.

"Not yet, Charley. Zerlinger pushed the empty coffee cups and full ashtrays aside impatiently, as if he meant to design a space ship on the stained tablecloth. "You've got a brain. That's why I brought you down here. Use it. Forget all our false starts. Look back at the basic problem. How can we make reacting nuclei push a vehicle?"

"Maybe we can do it with magnets."

I claim no credit for that automatic response. I wasn't really thinking, but only wondering vaguely how to get away from Zerlinger, and whether a shower would be worth

the effort before I went to bed. But an unexpected interest flickered in his tired eyes.

"How?"

I turned the idea over to see what had caught his attention.

"Take the reaction of hydrogen and lithium." I spoke almost at random. "The two nuclei fuse to make two high-speed alpha particles. Magnetic fields deflect alpha particles. With the right arrangement of strong enough magnets, we could channel them into an atomic jet that would propel a ship."

"Good enough." He leaned restlessly across the table. "Other people have thought of that. But how are you going to make the hydrogen and lithium react in the first place—without a uranium bomb to touch them off?"

"We might do it with the same magnetic field." I was still too dull with weariness to think of all the inevitable objections to what I was proposing. "We'll ionize the fuel atoms. Make 'em collide at reaction velocities."

"Won't work." Zerlinger scowled across the cluttered table. "The cross sections are too small."

"Then we'll magnify the cross sections," I said. "With a stronger magnetic field."

"How is that possible?" His glazed eyes blinked uncertainly. "No relationship has been established, between nuclear cross section and magnetic field intensity."

"Because nobody has tried a strong enough field." I was suddenly wide

awake, aroused by a flood of faith in my own idea. "That means the effect must be close to zero, with ordinary fields—but it ought to vary with the cube of the field intensity. Here, I can write the equations for that."

I jotted the symbols on a paper napkin. Zerlinger peered at them owl-ishly. A spark of conviction lit and brightened in his hollowed eyes.

"You've got it, Charlie!" He stood up drunkenly, folding the napkin with quivering fingers. "I'll take this to Draven. If you're so worn out, you can go on to bed."

I went to bed. Before I woke, that steamy afternoon, Zerlinger had converted the skeptics. Nuclear physicists had begun to recall laboratory effects that tended to prove the Guilborn equations. The conference was already planning the details of Project Lightyear.

Within a few weeks we were in New Mexico, staking out the sites for our shops and testing grounds on a high, bare table-mountain. Barbed wire went up to protect our secrets. Construction men and engineers swarmed into the astonished little town of Valdes, under the mesa.

Carol's letter came to me there, addressed in care of General Engineering, the dummy corporation we had set up to conceal the project. I thought I had forgotten her, yet my breath caught when I recognized her delicate script. She wrote:

Dear Charley:

I have been pressing Mrs. Stande-

fer, your old landlady here, for all bits of news she gets about you. She gave me your new address, and I hope you won't be too much surprised to hear from me.

You may be interested to know that Eon Hunter and I never got married, after all. Since his father's unexpected death last year—from a heart attack, as Mrs. Standefer may have written you—Eon is left to take care of his mother. With her feeling the way she does toward me, and her health so bad too, Eon decided that our marriage couldn't possibly work out. We've broken off the engagement—this time, for keeps!

Now I want to get away from Picton. I'm just finishing a business course, and I'm wondering if you couldn't recommend me for a secretarial position—anywhere but here! I can take dictation and type 80 words a minute.

*Yours hopefully,
Carol*

PS:

I often think of you, and I felt very happy when Mrs. Standefer told me about your new position with General Engineering. It sounds important!

Perhaps I should have recalled how unaccountably she and Eon had sabotaged that experiment in my general science class, because Project Lightyear was still nothing more than a billion-dollar experiment in a newer field of physics—and already giving us trouble enough.

But I didn't think of that.

I couldn't help wanting to see

Carol again, and it was easy enough to get her a job on the project. My heart began to thump when I saw her getting off the plane—the mischievous schoolgirl had bloomed into something far more exciting. There was no Mr. Baxter to lift an eyebrow when he found us together on the dusty streets of Valdes. I saw her as often as I could escape my job, even though she warned me candidly that she still had a soft spot for Eon.

"I'm sorry, Charley." We had parked on the rim of the mesa, outside the barbed wire, and she sat for a moment staring wistfully out across the brown desert at the ragged blue mountains eighty miles away. "I know Eon's hopeless. A born misfit. But he's hard to forget."

"Is he worth remembering?"

"He is." Tears filled her eyes. "He really is!"

When we got back to her apartment, she had me come in to see her scrapbook of Eon's poems. I leafed through them while she was in the kitchenette mixing us a drink. Most of them were manuscript copies. A few had been clipped from minor magazines. I didn't bother to read any of them—I don't care for most verse, and I was prepared to dislike these efforts in particular. I saw that they were signed EON—all in capitals, an arty-seeming touch that annoyed me. I closed the book with relief when Carol brought the drink.

"Do read them," she begged. "They'll help you understand how I feel about him. He doesn't fit into the world, but he never let it crush

him—that's the spirit you have to admire. In his own way, he has been creating his own new worlds. Worlds where beauty and splendor and courage really belong!"

Reluctantly I started reading something that turned out to be a love lyric addressed to Carol herself. It had a fire and feeling that stabbed me with a savage jealousy. I said as calmly as I could that it was very pretty, and gave the book to Carol. She opened it again, to read a few other passages aloud. Though I was not a very willing listener, her tender voice gave the words an unearthly beauty that somehow recalled Eon's strange painting of her and that prehistoric reptile.

"Isn't he magnificent?" she whispered eagerly. "Tragic, of course. But still magnificent! He has taken the whole world for his enemy, but he never surrenders. Even when he feels trapped and imprisoned, he's always in rebellion."

"I guess he does have some ability," I muttered grudgingly. "But, it's pretty hard to make a living out of writing, I'm told. Most of these poems weren't even published."

"That's the pity of it." She closed the book, with a sigh. "Eon says the modern world isn't geared for poetry. Only for mass production and mass destruction. He says poets and artists will soon be extinct, like the old dinosaurs. Unless things change."

I wasn't expecting any change, but Eon himself was far from extinct. I was fighting him for Carol,

with all the time I could take from the project, but even in Picton he remained a formidable rival. When he came to Valdes, I thought that I had lost her again.

The project was consuming all my exertions. We were lagging behind schedule. Our specifications called for new magnetic alloys and new superconductors that always seemed impossible until the bad news in our secret intelligence reports forced us to invent them.

That autumn Sunday, however, Dr. Zerlinger had let me off. Carol and I drove to the mountains and ate our picnic lunch on a granite crag high above the slopes of golden aspens. For a few light-hearted hours, I forgot the danger of war and the shadow of Eon. But he was waiting for Carol when we got back, sitting asleep in the little patio outside her apartment.

His gaunt face was dark with an untidy stubble of beard, and his grimy clothing looked as if he had ridden the freight trains all the way from Picton. Probably he had. He awoke when he heard us and stood up stiffly, grinning at Carol.

"Eon!" She ran to meet him with a breathless joy that hurt me like a knife. "Darling! I'd no idea—Is anything wrong?"

"Mother died two weeks ago," he told her. "I suppose I was pretty badly broken up at first. I had to get away from Picton." He looked ruefully down at himself. "I know I shouldn't have come out here in this shape. But I'm—well, broke. There

was nowhere else."

Though I wasn't quite delighted to see him, I tried to be civil. I took him to my room for a drink and a bath, and outfitted him with clean underwear and an old suit of mine, while Carol cooked supper for him.

She called me later that night and asked me to get him a job. That took some doing. Our table of organization at the project didn't call for poets—or even for common laborers, now that the construction work was done. Finally I got him on as a janitor in the spaceframe shop.

He had not been cleared for the guarded and restricted areas where we were at work on the experimental nucleonic motor, but the day he saw the half-finished hull of the Light-year lying in the cradle, he came up to me as I left the gate.

"Wait, Guilborn!" He was flushed and out of breath with an excitement that seemed somehow defiant. "I want to talk to you. Isn't this a spaceship you're building?"

"You've been told about security," I warned him rather curtly. "If you start asking too many questions—or talking too much about anything you may happen to see—you'll soon find yourself in serious trouble."

"I'm not a spy!" His lean face darkened. "But any fool could see you're working on an interplanetary ship." He caught anxiously at my arm. "What I want is a place aboard."

That startled me. "Why?"

"Because I despise this world we're trapped in." His low voice

trembled with a stifled savagery. "This ugly world! It has always robbed me of everything I wanted. It's fighting to crush me now. I'd risk anything to get away from it—even just to the moon or Mars!"

"I doubt that they're looking for space jockeys, right now," I told him noncommittally. "Anyhow, I'm afraid your notions are a little too poetic. The first spacemen will have to be scientists, and they won't be running away from this world. Their survival will depend on how much of it they manage to take with them."

Then, unwisely, I tried to give him a piece of advice. "I guess things have been hard for you. But don't forget that lots of people are moderately happy, even in this world you hate. I believe you're still young enough to adjust yourself."

He walked on beside me toward the parking lot without speaking, and I thought that he was listening.

"By the way, we have a man here on the staff I'd like for you to see." I was trying to sound casual. "Even in this imperfect world, you'll find that science can help solve some of the problems it creates. Dr. Fineman is a pretty good psychiatrist. If you'll let me see about an appointment—"

"Certainly not," he broke in harshly. "I'm not interested in cutting and trimming myself to fit whatever you and Dr. Fineman think I ought to be. Thanks, all the same. But if anything has to be adjusted, I prefer to adjust the world and not myself."

That sounded like nonsense, and I told him so.

"You're the crazy one!" he flared at me. "Living in your own crazy dreamland! Just wait, and I'll show you!"

He stalked angrily away to catch his bus.

I had the evening off, but when I phoned Carol she told me that Eon was taking her out to dinner. I went rather morosely back to the shop and helped Dr. Zerlinger run the preliminary tests on a new paramagnetic alloy. Carol was calling when I got back to my room at midnight. She was sobbing into the phone, and she wanted to know if I had quarreled with Eon.

"He stood me up!" she gasped. "Never even called. You know him, Charley—how strange and moody he is. I'm so frightened about him! Where could he be?"

Drunk somewhere, I thought. But I didn't say so. I went with Carol to the house where we had found him a room. He wasn't there, and Mrs. Montoya knew nothing about him. We checked the three bars in Valdes, but he had not been seen.

He didn't report for work next morning. The project security officers failed to find him anywhere. They questioned Carol about him, and grilled me as if they almost suspected that I had planted him to steal information for the Kremlin. Fortunately, he had not been inside the secret shops, and I felt certain that no harm had been done.

Only a few weeks later, however, General Barlow called us out of the shops to an emergency meeting at

the headquarters building. When we were packed into a guarded conference room, he stalked to the speaker's stand.

"Some blabbermouthed fool has leaked!" His drill-field voice was brittle with wrath. "Or else some damned spy has sold us out. Listen to this!"

He jerked his head at Colonel Fearing, the quiet little security chief, who was standing by with a tape recorder. There was a wail of funeral music, and then a doom-laden voice began to proclaim that the American capitalistic-reactionary atomic murderers were preparing their crown-ing atrocity against the defenseless peoples of the world.

"The latest propaganda blast across the Iron Curtain," the general rasped. "Our monitors picked up this English-language version last night."

"—red-handed lackey scientists paid by the Wall Street gangsters have set up this new murder-laboratory in the American desert, near the village of Valdes," the machine ran on. "They are building an atomic fusion reactor, of a new and criminally dangerous type. With it, they are prepearing to murder every living thing on Earth.

"Even themselves!

"It is known that this new atomic murder device has been designed to start a hydro-lithium nuclear fusion reaction in a solution of lithium salts. Apparently these pig-headed American atomic murderers are determined to ignore one terrible fact which was pointed out today by a peace-loving Soviet atomic scientist. That deadly

fact is this—all the oceans of the Earth are actually dilute solutions of lithium salts.

"These American atomic murderers are preparing to detonate the whole Earth, unless their criminal experiments are halted by prompt action from the peace-loving peoples of the democratic Soviet nations."

The angry general raised his hand, and Colonel Fearing shut off the machine.

"Lies!" Barlow barked. "The same old stinking lies. Actually, as most of you know, the lithium content of sea water is excessively small, and I have been assured a hundred times by competent authorities that the hydro-lithium reaction cannot possibly maintain itself outside the fusion field. In fact, we're still far from sure that we can maintain it anywhere, even inside the reactor."

He caught his breath, glaring at us.

"Yet these particular lies are extremely dangerous to the project, and to our whole defense program, because they have been wrapped so cleverly around a core of fact—the key secret that we have allowed some fool or traitor to betray. They are doubly dangerous, because we can't deny them."

"Why not?" Zerlinger inquired.

"Because we've no idea how much secret information has been compromised." Barlow glowered at him. "We must assume, however, that if the commissars knew how to build a fusion reactor of their own, they'd keep quiet and build it. Since they

didn't, they're pretty obviously fishing for more information.

"You see we can't say anything at all, without giving them more. Any departure from our established policy of simply ignoring such charges would at least confirm the existence of Project Lightyear. Our lips are sealed.

"But we must stop that leak!"

As the spy-hunt began, I recalled Eon Hunter's defiant declaration that he was going to adjust the world instead of himself. Now his words had an ominous ring. It seemed conceivable to me that his twisted bitterness had made him a dupe of the Communists, and I took my suspicions to the security officers.

They interrogated me all over again, dredging up everything I could recall about Eon's habits and associates. I knew that they would go from me to Carol, and that night I stopped at her apartment to find out how she had stood the ordeal. She came to the door with tear-stains on her face, and she whitened with anger when she saw me.

"You jealous fool!" Her voice was choked and bitter. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing so bad." I shrugged. "If Eon's innocent, he can clear himself. But if he is, I'd like to know why he ran away."

"You never understood him," she whispered savagely. "You're not fit to!" Her voice lifted hysterically. "He's no spy! And I'll always hate you, for trying to tattle on him."

"Please, Carol." I stepped toward

her in the doorway. "You're all keyed up. Let's go out somewhere for a drink—"

She stopped me with a stinging slap.

"Get out!" she gasped. "I never want to see you again!"

The door slammed in my face.

But she called me one night, not two weeks later. Her voice was hoarse from crying. She hadn't heard from Eon, and she was making up her mind to get over him again.

"I'm terribly sorry I slapped you, Charley," she whispered. "Because I guess you're right. I know Eon has always hated the world he was born into. I'm afraid he wouldn't stop at anything to smash what he hates."

Her slap wasn't hard to forgive. She let me come by for her. We had two drinks in a bar, and drove out on the mesa. We didn't stay long. She was trying a little too hard to be gay, and she broke into tears when I kissed her.

"I can't help it, darling," she sobbed. "All this isn't very fair to you. But I just can't get over Eon."

Colonel Fearing told me a few days later that the federal agents had found Eon, without much difficulty. It turned out that he had simply walked away from Valdes in a fit of depression, and hitch-hiked to New York City. He was living there under his own name, and he soon convinced the investigators that he had never betrayed or even learned any facts about the hydro-lithium reactor.

Far from attempting to destroy the profit system, so he told the fed-

eral men, he had decided to make the best of it. He had given up his forlorn dabblings in poetry and art, and found a job with an advertising agency. Surprisingly, his new employers valued him highly. When they came to his defense, the investigation was dropped.

Things went badly at Valdes that winter. Carol was sick with unhappiness, alternating between moods of spiritless despondency and savage efforts to be cheerful. We went out together now and then, but I knew that I could never really take Eon's place. As far as I could, I let the project take hers.

The source of the security leak had never been found. General Barlow decided that it must have been only a thoughtless slip of somebody's tongue, in the wrong company. But damage enough was already done.

If the commissars were really fishing for more information, they got none. They kept hammering at us with their propaganda barrages until the phrase "pig-headed atomic murderers" began to get under everybody's skin, but the general refused to authorize any official statement that we were not really about to detonate the Earth.

Even in America, the seed of lies took root. Responsible newspaper and TV reporters picked up the propaganda charges. Carol herself began quizzing me uneasily about how much lithium was dissolved in sea water, and what would keep it from reacting with the hydrogen.

Dr. Draven, the President's stooped old scientific adviser, flew out from Washington with more bad news.

"You'd think the Comrades were falling for their own propaganda." His yellow parchment face was creased with a faint sardonic smile. "They're acting as if they really believe you're about to set atomic fire to the planet."

Apprehension quenched his yellow smile.

"Central Intelligence says they're getting set for what they'll probably call a preventive attack on our main industrial and defense centers. Valdes seems to be Target Number One. Their mobilization schedule doesn't leave you much more time."

We tried to rush the project.

But we were already working under too much pressure. Tired men blundered. A superconductor coil was cooled too fast in the annealing furnace, so that it blew out on the test rack. Dr. Zerlinger was critically burned by the flash of vaporized metal, and without his dogged courage the rest of us found it hard to keep our faith in the Lightyear alive.

Even the weather was against us. Unpredicted floods of rain turned the desert soil to bottomless mud that sank beneath our test racks on the field. Later in the winter, when that damage had been repaired, unforecast blizzards came howling across the mesa whenever we tried to schedule an open-air test. Spring brought savage southwest winds and abrasive clouds of yellow grit that cut the fin-

ish from whatever it touched. A sandstorm was blowing when Carol called me at the shop, late one Sunday afternoon.

"Guess what!" She was breathless with excitement. "Eon's here!"

"I'll keep out of sight." I tried not to seem too sulky. "Just forget our dinner date. I've work enough to do."

"Wait, Charley!" Her voice seemed puzzled and somewhat hurt. "It's you he wants to see. So please come on out. I'm cooking a Mexican dinner for the three of us."

"I don't want to see Eon," I protested. "And I'm afraid it wouldn't be a very cozy party."

"You've got to come." She seemed oddly desperate. "You'll see why."

Eon opened the door for me, at her apartment. The change in him astonished me, not that he had become any sleek and cynical huckster. Though his shirt was clean for once, his dark hair was still rumpled untidily, and his gaunt face looked sullen and hungry as ever. The difference was a new sureness in him, a glint of purpose in his unsmiling eyes and a strength in his quick handshake, that made me wonder what had happened to him.

"Hullo, Guilborn." He took my hat and nodded at a chair, as if he owned the place. "I want to talk to you. About your experiments with the hydro-lithium reaction."

"Hold on, Hunter." I reached for my hat. "You were employed here. You ought to know I can't discuss anything of the sort with any unauthorized person. Certainly not with

you."

He kept my hat.

"Take it easy, Guilborn." He grimaced stiffly. "I'm not looking for any more trouble with the FBI. I don't want any secrets. I flew back here just to tell you something."

"Don't tell me." I got hold of my hat. "If you know anything you think ought to be reported, Carol can give you the number of the project security office."

I was turning to leave, when Carol came out of the kitchenette, trailing the tantalizing odors of tacos and enchiladas. She was adorably domestic, with a smudge of flour on her nose, but when I saw the look she gave Eon, I knew she was farther away from me than the moon.

"Charley, you've just got to listen." She took my hat and hung it in the entry closet.

"Okay." I sat down reluctantly, facing Eon. "I'll listen. But first I want to know where you've learned anything at all about anybody's research into the hydro-lithium reaction."

"From two sources, Guilborn," he answered quietly. "From the FBI, when you set them after me. From all the recent news stories about the danger of a thermonuclear reaction getting out of control, after the federal men had called them to my attention."

"If that propaganda has upset you, you can start relaxing," I told him. "Of course it's true there is a trace of lithium in sea water, and somewhat more in the crust of the Earth and

even in your own body. There's plenty of hydrogen. But the two elements have existed side by side since the Earth was born, through every sort of cataclysm. No conceivable effect could set off an uncontrolled reaction —"

"Wrong, Guilborn," Eon broke in softly. "There's one effect that you have failed to consider."

He spoke with a disconcerting air of knowing what he was talking about. I flinched from a pang of alarm, before I could remind myself that he had always been peculiarly opaque to every fact of science.

"Huh?" I blinked and got my breath. "What effect?"

"It follows from the working of what you might call a metaphysical law. I got the first hint of it years ago, back in high school, when Carol and I fouled up your gravity experiment." He grinned sardonically. "Remember?"

"No experiment works every time," I muttered defensively. "But what is this metaphysical law that is going to blow up the Earth?"

He paused to smile fondly up at Carol, as she came to sit on the arm of his chair.

"This may upset you, Guilborn." He looked back at me, as quietly deliberate as if he had failed to catch my intended sarcasm. "But you'll eventually have to accept the discovery I have made—that nature isn't quite the cold dead machine that you physicists like to imagine."

"Then what is it?"

"Mind and matter are bound to-

gether more closely than even the parapsychologists have ever guessed," he said. "I believe the universe was created by Intelligence. I know it responds to creative belief."

"Somebody, Jeans, I think, used to say that the Architect of the universe must have been a mathematician. And I suppose mathematics is a mental exercise." I nodded impatiently. "But what's this about creative belief?"

"The universe is not complete." Eon stood up excitedly. "Creation is still going on." His low voice turned hoarse with a hurried urgency, and his deep-set eyes were burning with something like fanaticism. "Everything around us is still being molded and remolded by what people believe."

I tried not to smile. "So you think we're all suffering from a kind of mass hallucination that the world exists?"

"No." He scowled at my amusement. "The universe is real enough. But it's still evolving. The process is quite orderly and usually very gradual, something that has been going on around us all our lives, so much a part of us that we're seldom aware of it at all—"

"If you're talking about the evolution of life on Earth, or of the stars in the galaxy—"

"I'm not," he said sharply. "I'm talking about more basic changes, in what you call the laws of nature."

"The crust of the Earth is a record that goes back a couple of billion years, and it's full of proof that nature hasn't changed very much in that

short time." I couldn't help smiling again. "I guess it's no secret that we're working with the laws of physics here at the project, but I certainly haven't noticed any alterations from day to day."

"You never will." He stalked toward me restlessly. "Because all your laboratories are set up on the false premise that the laws of nature never change. I had to find a different sort of laboratory, to test my theory about that metaphysical law. That's why I went into the advertising game."

"Huh?" I had hardly heard him, because I was busy formulating a new theory of my own. The saturnine defiance smouldering in his eyes and snarling in his voice brought back his old threat that he would adjust the world and not himself, and I recalled that the source of our security leak had never been found. If Eon had been responsible after all, it occurred to me, he must have come back now with this preposterous fabrication to trick me into spilling something more about the project. I decided to play along with him, and report everything to Colonel Fearing.

"And what did you find out?"

"The theory holds up, Guilborn." His dark, hard face wore a cold elation. "If enough people really believe anything, it tends to become the truth!"

"That's too much!" I couldn't help snorting. "Haven't you got the cart in front of the horse? Physical effects do create faith, but I doubt very much that the proposition works

the other way around——"

"But it does." Annoyance began to edge his voice. "That metaphysical truth is the very foundation of the universe. Naturally it's hard for you to grasp, because you're a scientist. You're used to thinking backwards. But if you'll open your mind for half a minute, I can show you that everything around us has been shaped by belief."

"You mean the Earth used to be flat, because people thought it was?"

"Exactly!" He nodded triumphantly. "No doubt magic used to work, in prehistoric times, as well as atom bombs do today. The apparent facts of your modern scientific universe were not discovered, Guilborn. They were invented. You've invented some of them yourself."

The sheer novelty of that notion caught me for an instant.

"Just look back at your own work," his urgent voice went on. "Wasn't the experimental evidence always pretty flimsy and ambiguous, in the beginning? Weren't you always pretty anxious to believe you really had something new? Wasn't your main difficulty always to convert the skeptics? Didn't you always have a good many experimental failures—until you had managed to build up a sufficient potential of creative belief to solidify your new idea into fact?"

I shook my head uncomfortably—I couldn't help recalling that first emergency conference in the old resort hotel, when we had shaped the basic theory of the hydro-lithium drive out of nothing more than sheer

necessity. Earlier researchers, I remembered, had failed to find any effect at all of magnetic fields upon nuclear cross sections.

But I tried to get hold of myself.

"Nonsense!" I groped wildly for some telling argument. "Suppose magic used to work, as you were saying. What stopped it?"

"Skepticism," Eon answered promptly. "It was a bitter battle of beliefs, fought for several thousand years, with a good many of the champions on both sides burned at the stake. But the scientists, so-called, proved to be the slicker magicians. They finally turned the tide of faith. Their victory uprooted the old facts of magic, and forced their clever new facts into the framework of reality."

"A neat little sophistry." I shrugged. "If I say that the spectra of the distant galaxies prove that the thermonuclear processes have been going on, exactly as we observe them now, for at least half a billion years, you can always answer that my belief has created my proof. But what follows?"

"The end of the world." He looked as grave as if he meant it. "Unless you stop your reckless playing with this hydro-lithium reaction."

"Is that propaganda still eating on you?" I laughed at him. "A hundred facts prove there is no possible danger —"

"Perhaps they did," he broke in. "But you have changed the facts."

"How?"

"What you don't realize is that you had to twist the whole universe

just slightly out of shape, to create the conditions you need for this reaction." His voice lifted, as I started to protest. "I know what you've done, because I've been following the scientific news from the small nations where knowledge is still free. The good scientists aren't all Americans —and what they report isn't all propaganda! These new reports on the factors involved in the hydro-lithium reaction contradict all the older results. I don't know your mumbo-jumbo, but it's something about phenomenally higher values for the nuclear cross sections, under certain critical conditions—if that means anything."

What that could have meant was something I didn't want to think about. I winced, in spite of myself, from a stab of cold apprehension. But Eon was certainly the world's worst judge of scientific possibilities.

"Plenty of foreign scientists are honestly—and desperately—concerned about the danger that your experiments will start a thermonuclear reaction in the oceans or the crust of the Earth," he rushed on. "You would be, Guilborn, if you weren't shut away here behind your Chinese wall of military security."

His lean face tightened bleakly.

"But I've said my piece," he finished. "The survival of the world depends on what you do about it."

"I'll pass your warning along to Dr. Zierlinger," I said. "You understand that I must report this meeting to the project security officer, too."

He turned white.

"So you still think I'm a spy?"

His bony fists clenched as if he meant to hit me, and Carol ran to grab his arm.

"No, Charley!" She looked at me with tears in her eyes. "You can't mean that!"

I squirmed uneasily in my chair.

"Eon, I don't know what you are."

I looked up at his furious, bloodless face, and still I didn't know. "Just a harmless crank, I hope. I still suspect that you ought to see a good psychiatrist. If you were entirely sane, you wouldn't expect me to take any serious stock in this sort of nonsense."

"Then you won't stop that research?"

"Anybody who accepted your ideas would be laughed off the project."

"You poor deluded fool!" Anger grated in his voice. "And I've been just as stupid, wasting my time on you. I see I'll have to do it alone."

He stumbled blindly to the entry closet and came back with my hat. When he saw it wasn't his, he flung it savagely to the floor. Carol caught anxiously at his elbow.

"Darling, please sit down," she begged. "The food is getting cold —"

"Food?" He pushed her roughly away. "When your idiot friend is busy blowing up the planet! I've got a plane to catch."

He slammed out.

"I'm so terribly sorry for him." Carol watched him through the window until he was out of sight, and then turned slowly back to me. Her eyes were wet, but she managed not

to sob. "Charley," she whispered, "are you really sure he's wrong?"

"Crazy, I'm afraid."

I was picking up my hat, but she made me stay. I thought at first that she was only trying to delay my report to Colonel Fearing, but I liked her too well to care. Perhaps she really wanted me. We ate the Mexican dinner, and drank a fifth of whisky I had brought, and for a little while, with Carol in my arms, I forgot all about Eon.

Next day I had a throbbing head, however, and a nagging sense of worry. Eon's metaphysical law still looked like a childish fantasy, but I couldn't forget the way he had somehow sabotaged that high school experiment. At our regular morning conference in the headquarters building, I reported his warning.

"Pure nonsense, of course. But he's so serious about it himself that he almost frightens me. He came all the way out here from New York to warn us. When I failed to take any stock in his weird theory, he threatened to do something on his own—he didn't say what."

"A crank." Zerlinger shrugged.

"Another victim of that propaganda barrage." Colonel Fearing nodded. "It's beginning to crack the civilian morale."

"Softening us up for the bombers." General Barlow cleared his throat explosively. "Intelligence says we're running out of time. Nothing but the Lightyear can bail us out now. The Pentagon says we've got to have her ready for a test flight, by May first."

"She will be," Zerlinger promised.

"About this Hunter." Barlow swung to Fearing. "Probably just a harmless crackpot. But have an eye on him. Just in case."

The federal agents kept an eye on Eon, and Fearing was soon passing on some pretty strange reports. Eon had not returned to his New York advertising job. He had gone on to Los Angeles instead, and launched a new cult.

"Something he calls the Fellowship of Free Mutationists," Fearing told me. "A weird new religion, I gather, mixed up with a lot of silly hocus-pocus he calls White Magic. He's preaching that people can turn this battered old world into a shining paradise, by faith alone."

"More or less what he was telling me." I nodded. "No doubt he's crazy."

"Crazy like a fox!" The colonel smiled. "He used to be an advertising wizard, and he knows how to use every trick in the book to trap the saps. Belief can stop the hell bombs, he keeps preaching, and they're all afraid of hell bombs. They're mobbing him, to stake out their claims in his rosy heaven. Plenty of them have got money to pay for TV time and hook more suckers. Your old friend must be skimming off the millions."

"You're wrong about him," I protested. "Not that I'm defending him. I don't like him. But I'm sure he's more than just a crook. Though I've never felt that I really understood him, I believe he's sincere about this

thing. In his own twisted way. That's what worries me. I'm afraid he's crazy enough to do something pretty desperate to keep the Lightyear on the ground."

"We'll watch him," Fearing promised. "The federal men are already infiltrating his setup, to look for ties with the Kremlin or anything subversive."

The agents found no foreign ties. The sole inspiration of the Mutationists, they reported, had been Eon Hunter himself. And they said that he was advocating no violent action of any kind. The world was to be rebuilt by faith alone. The only disturbing report was that the investigating agents themselves had begun resigning from the FBI.

"It's got me!" the colonel grumbled uneasily. "They are all trained men, and loyal Americans. They know the desperate crisis we're up against. And still they're quitting. To take up White Magic—whatever that is!"

At the project, all our security precautions were tightened. More barbed wire was strung around the restricted areas, the radar net was spread wider; guided interceptor missiles stood ready for instant flight.

Inside the security screen, we pressed desperately ahead. The space-frame, as the engineers called the Lightyear's long hull, was towed out to the testing apron and hauled erect in a tall gantry crane. We installed the big sodium vapor power plant, that was to start on chemical fuels and then run on waste energy from

the reactor itself. By the middle of April, we were assembling the paramagnetic components and the super-conductor coils.

Busy as we were, however, Dr. Zerlinger gave me a night off, a few days before the date we had set for the test. Eon's new followers were gathering in Albuquerque, and Carol wanted me to drive her there to hear him speak.

The meeting was held in the open air, on the lava-scattered slopes of an extinct volcano west of the city. The size of the crowd amazed me. Though we had arrived two hours before Eon was to appear, we had to park several miles from the hill. We climbed into a murmuring forest of expectant humanity.

It seemed to me at first that Eon's new cult had been rather crudely blended from a mixture of outworn superstitions and the cynical devices of the advertising hucksters. A circle of large stones had been piled upright on the hilltop, like the megaliths of some prehistoric sacred place, and the plume of smoke above them might have come from some neolithic altar. But the sound trucks cruising about the hillside were new and sleek as the Lightyear; they were splashed with bright-lettered slogans, BELIEVE AND LIVE!, and bawling out recorded music.

The day was windy and raw. We stood shivering on the sharp volcanic rocks, among an odd assortment of neat business men, blanketed Indians, ranchers and miners and farmers,

chattering housewives, staring children, uniformed servicemen from the nearby defense installations. A thin Mexican youth came toiling past us on crutches.

"Help me, help me!" he was whining. "Help me touch *El Brujo!*"

"They say he can work miracles." A tall cattlemen beside us removed his ten-gallon hat. "Like Christ in the old days!"

The young paralytic stumbled and fell. He lay for a moment whimpering on the rocks, until a plump little man with a white armband came bustling to help him rise.

"*Gracias!*" he sobbed. "Help me touch *El Brujo!* I wish to walk again!"

"You don't have to touch him," the plump man said. "A true belief is all you need. Wait here, brother, and listen to his message."

The disciple rushed away and the cripple stood leaning on his crutches, waiting with the rest of us in the chilly dusk.

"Believe and live!" a faded old woman was whispering piously. "Believe and live forever!"

"Hogwash!" a small boy jeered at her. "My Dad says Hunter's nothing but a big-mouthed crook —"

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Or he might turn you into a pig."

He gulped and shut up.

"If he can only stop the bombs," a young girl murmured. "That's enough for me."

A breathless silence ran suddenly across the crowd. Another sound truck came lurching toward us down the

hill from that circle of standing stones. When it stopped, a man clambered awkwardly into the spotlights on a little platform built over the cab, still so far away that I didn't recognize him.

"Eon!" Carol gasped. "It's Eon!"

The wind had died, and the quiet night seemed suddenly warmer. Eon lifted up his hands in the stillness, and the sound trucks bellowed with his voice. He preached the same fantastic doctrine that I had laughed at that night in Carol's apartment, and the multitudes murmured in awed approval. At the end, he called for a sign in the sky.

"Believe!" The booming of the sound trucks had become almost hypnotic. "Believe that all the evil machines of death must vanish from the Earth, and they will be gone. Believe that better things must come, and your belief will mold them into being. For a sign of the truth, let us create a star!"

He paused dramatically, pointing up into the night. A hundred thousand eyes were lifted to the sky. Carol caught my arm, her fingers quivering with emotion. But for a moment nothing happened.

"A sign!" the sound trucks thundered. "Let us make a shooting star!"

A meteor burned high across the dark.

Somehow, I wasn't much surprised. For one strange moment, as the great gasp of awed adoration swept across the hillside, I even felt a wild elation, as if the faith and will of all those exalted thousands had

become a miraculous power in which I could share. A sharp pain caught my throat, and my own tears blurred that fleeting track of light.

I stamped my aching feet and lighted a cigarette, trying to get hold of myself. Canned organ music was rolling out of the sound trucks now, and Eon's tiny-seeming figure stood silent in the spotlights until the eyes of the crowd had come back to him.

"That star is the sign of our new universe!" the sound trucks brayed again. "And all the stars are in our reach! If you want them, follow me. Come now and pledge your faith. We can stop the death machines, and put out the atomic fire that is burning up the Earth, if you will only follow me!"

Carol kissed me suddenly, and tried to slip away.

"Wait!" I stumbled after her.

"Don't let him fool you. That meteor was probably just a mass hallucination. Maybe just an accident. It couldn't have been—created!"

She paused, and I caught her trembling arm.

"I'm sorry, Charley. Really terribly sorry." For a moment she clung to me. "It doesn't seem quite fair to you—even if you won't believe. Because you've always been so good to me. But don't you see I must go to him?"

I didn't see, but I had to let her go.

The Mexican boy was struggling up the lava slope again, wailing in the dark because no miracle had healed him. She ran after him, and took his

arm to help him. I watched them numbly until they were lost in the mob, and then wandered back unhappily to look for my car.

I drove back to Valdes that night, troubled and alone. Men were still at work around the Lightyear, when I went by the testing field. In the floodlights, beyond the fences and the guards and the miles of dark mesa, the ship was a white graceful finger pointing toward the stars.

Her shining promise cheered me. She would fly above all interceptors. She would ferry men out to claim and fortify the moon. Even though she carried nucleonic bombs, her cargo would be the Pax Americana. When she had brought peace to all the Earth, she could go on to explore the universe.

And I would be aboard.

Two nights later, we got the last magnet mounted and the last circuit tested and the last gallon of lithium solution pumped into the fuel tanks. Dr. Zerlinger and I came back out from town before three next morning, to recheck everything for the first test flight.

As we turned into the parking area, the headlights of our jeep caught a man crouching against a fin of the ship. I shouted a warning, and the guards were on him in a moment. He stood waiting for them quietly, holding out his empty hands.

"A saboteur?" Zerlinger panted, as we came tumbling out of the jeep. "Or what's he up to?"

"Dunno, sir." A guard clicked

handcuffs on the prisoner. "He's got no weapons or explosives, far as I can see. Just a piece of blue chalk."

"That was enough." The prisoner straightened defiantly. "I've grounded your ship."

I recognized his voice.

"Eon!" I gasped. "How'd you get in *here*?"

"Why, hullo, Guilborn." He looked up at me with an unfrightened insolence. "No use trying to tell you how I got inside your stupid barriers. You wouldn't understand."

Zerlinger picked up the piece of blue chalk.

"Huh?" He bent to peer at a ragged star that Eon had scrawled on the bright metal fin. "What's this?"

"A hex mark," Eon said. "I've hexed your ship and everything in it. It will never fly."

"Just a little chalk —" I tried to laugh.

"The chalk itself is nothing," he said. "The pentacle is only an incidental symbol in the rite that I have performed to induce a belief that your wonderful new hydro-lithium drive can't function. Because of that belief, it won't function. And so you won't set the world on fire!"

"We'll soon see what happens," I muttered.

The reactor had to work, because theory was now adequately proven and all our preliminary tests had ultimately been successful—but some vague unease made me turn to scrub the chalk marks off the ship.

Eon laughed behind me.

General Barlow and Colonel Fearing came skidding up in the general's car. The colonel and his men took Eon away to the guardhouse, and the general went aboard the Lightyear with Zerlinger and me, to oversee the test.

In half an hour, everything was rechecked and ready for the takeoff. The general climbed into the nose compartment with the pilot. Zerlinger and I strapped ourselves into acceleration seats, down beside the reactor.

A kind of numbness had crept over me, in those last long minutes. All my senses were somehow deadened, and my fingers were clumsy with the straps. Yet I wasn't consciously afraid. There was certainly no reason for fear, I reminded myself—if anything went wrong, if the reaction went out of control, none of us would ever know it. I wondered where Eon had left Carol, and hoped that she would not be involved too painfully when he came to trial. I felt relieved when the general's iron voice began counting off the seconds to takeoff.

"Minus thirty . . . minus twenty-five . . ."

At a grunt from Zerlinger, I opened up the idling turbines. They wailed like sirens, gaining speed. The generators whined. The magnetometer needles quivered and shot across their dials, measuring the growing intensity of the reaction field.

" . . . minus five . . . minus four . . ."

Zerlinger pulled a lever, and the fuel pumps began to throb.

" . . . minus one . . . take off!"

I opened the lithium valve and dropped back into the acceleration seat, opening my mouth wide to save my ears from the atomic thunder of the jet. But there was no thunder. I lay there, too numb to breathe, waiting for the atomic drive to hammer us off the Earth, but I felt no thrust.

There was only the purr of the racing generators, and the muffled thrumming of the pumps, and then the sudden harsh rasp of General Barlow's voice on the intercom phone, asking what the hell had happened.

"Nothing." Zerlinger sat up dazedly, mopping at his pale face. "Not even the end of the world!"

We rechecked everything. The magnetometers showed the reaction field at full intensity. The pumps were injecting a full stream of the lithium solution. But there was no nuclear reaction that we could detect, even with a Geiger counter.

"A flat failure!" Zerlinger muttered at last. "I can't imagine why —"

"I can!" rapped the general, who had come down from the nose compartment to watch our frantic search for the trouble. "Come along, and we'll find out!"

We followed him off the Lightyear. He was shouting for his car, when a jeep came lurching into the floodlights. It screeched to a halt beside us. I saw Colonel Fearing at the wheel. He sat staring at the general, woodenly silent.

"Well, Fearing!" the general barked. "Where's your prisoner?"

"I can't say, sir."

"What's that?"

"I came to report that he's—uh—gone, sir."

"Gone?" The little general stiffened incredulously. "We can't have that. He somehow sabotaged the reactor. I want the truth sweated out of him. That hex business was just an act, to cover up whatever he really did to the ship."

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know *what*?"

"About that hex business, sir." The colonel cringed from the general's outraged stare. "When we were locking him up, you see, he told me that he was going to hex his way out. We left him alone in a cell, for not more than ten minutes. Guards were watching the corridor outside, all the time. They didn't notice anything. When I came back to interrogate the prisoner, the cell door was still locked. But Hunter wasn't there."

"How'd he get away?"

"I don't know, sir. I searched the cell myself. It appears to be intact. I couldn't get out of it."

"Didn't you find any clue?"

"There was—uh—something, sir. I'm not sure you'll want to call it a clue. But Hunter had found a piece of soap. He had used it to mark a sort of star on the floor of his cell. I don't know why. But I can't help—uh—wondering—"

The air raid sirens interrupted him.

The floodlights flickered once and went off. Fearing bent mechanically to snap off the headlights of his jeep. We stood blind in the unexpected

blackout. I tried to hope that it was only an ill-timed practise alert—until a parachute flare blazed overhead, drenching us in a ghastly blue glare.

"The bastards!" General Barlow gasped. "Must have launched their aircraft off submarine carriers! Sneaked in over Mexico—or we'd have picked them up. Caught us with our pants down." His ragged voice lifted. "Take cover men! Wherever you can!"

We staggered off the concrete apron where the dead ship stood, and started digging futile little hollows in the cold desert sand, with only our hands. We were naked. The whole nation was. The Lightyear had been our last hope—till Eon came.

Crouching there, I heard a few of our fighters taking off and saw the bright yellow jets of our interceptor missiles rising, but they were nearly all too late. That blue flare kept burning in the sky, and soon I heard the scream of falling bombs.

The enemy, I thought disjunctedly, could hardly know that Eon had hexed the project. We were still Target Number One, and the dead hull standing on the apron was the bull's-eye. I buried myself as deep as I could, waiting for the atomic explosions.

The bombs thudded all around us—and somehow I was still alive to hear them. One plunged down so near that it scattered a spray of sand over me, but the only explosion was a great burst of yellow flame from a bomber that crashed a mile south on the mesa.

"Delayed action bombs!" Or maybe only duds!" The man next to me stood up abruptly under that cruel blue light, and I saw that he was General Barlow. "Maybe we've still got a chance!"

He shouted for Colonel Fearing. They ran to the staff car and roared away. As the flare died at last, in the frosty dawn, the bomb disposal squads came out to begin digging gingerly into the new craters around us.

The sirens hooted out the all clear signal. Zerlinger and I climbed shivering out of our shallow pits and limped stiffly back toward the Lightyear. The tall hull stood untouched—except for the smear of blue chalk on the fin, where I had tried to erase Eon's hex mark—but it had been neatly bracketed by the bombs, and the disposal officer ordered us away.

Numbed from shock and cold, we plodded heavily back across the field toward the shops. I could hear Zerlinger cursing under his breath. We both stopped once to look back at the Lightyear. She was beautiful in the first glancing sunlight, lean with the atomic might that we had given her to save America, but somehow she was dead.

Colonel Fearing overtook us in a jeep, before we reached the shops. His face was gray and twitching with strain. With only a curt nod at me, he told Zerlinger to get in with him. They went back to where the disposal crews were digging, and I walked on alone.

The mess hall was buzzing with

the first wild rumors of the war, when I stopped aimlessly there. The sneak raiders had struck at all our greatest cities and most vital defenses. An H-bomb had blotted out Chicago. Our stockpiles of atomic weapons had all been destroyed on the ground. A Russian space ship had crashed in the Pacific and set off a thermonuclear reaction. The oceans were already boiling. All coastal areas were being evacuated.

Most of that was obvious nonsense—thermonuclear reactions don't stop with boiling water. But I didn't know what to believe. I wandered back to my desk in the shops and waited there, trying to read a paperbacked novel and listening to each new rumor and longing for something useful to do.

By afternoon, the reports had taken an optimistic turn. Chicago had escaped, after all. Though falling missiles and crashing planes had caused casualties and damage, the enemy atomic weapons had all been duds. Our own air force was hitting back, hard. Moscow had been obliterated. The enemy was already begging for peace.

The facts were stranger than the rumors. I learned them late that night, when General Barlow called me to his office at headquarters. From the bleak set of his jaw, I could see that the war wasn't over, at all. He looked up across his desk with reddened, haggard eyes.

"Well, Guilborn," he snapped. "What do you think of Hunter and his hexes?"

"I don't understand what he could have done to the Lightyear," I answered uncertainly. But, as a physicist, I can't believe his silly witchcraft did any harm —"

"You may have to," he broke in harshly. "Because I have just received top secret information that Hunter and his gang of traitors have somehow sabotaged our whole stockpile of nuclear weapons."

"Huh!"

"Our strategic aircraft have gone out on retaliatory missions. They are reporting back that all their A-bombs and H-bombs have failed to explode. And now this!"

His hard fingers crumpled a strip of yellow teletype paper.

"Saboteurs have been arrested inside all the secret depots where our nuclear materials are stored. None of these men was caught with any weapons or explosives. Just pieces of chalk. They were scratching what they referred to as hex marks on the doors and walls of the depot buildings. They all admit they belong to Hunter's crazy cult. They claim they've put the hex on the atom!"

His sick eyes glared at me.

"They succeeded in doing *something*. The officers in charge have begun to make some preliminary investigations. They report that the stored materials still *look* intact. There is no evidence of any tampering—except for those chalk marks. But Geiger counter checks show that the stocks of uranium and plutonium and deuterium have completely lost their

radio activity—"

"Impossible!"

"That's what Zerlinger said, when he heard about it." The general grinned bleakly. "I've sent him over to the nearest depot, to look around for himself."

"May I go —"

"Zerlinger will head the scientific inquiry into how this sabotage was carried out," his brittle voice cut me off. "I've another job for you."

He paused, shuffling papers on his desk without looking down at them. His narrowed eyes studied me, uncomfortable as a surgeon's probe.

"You know the traitor," he rapped at last. "You know his girl. You know, as well as anybody, what he has done to us. I want you to run him down. I'll arrange for you to receive every possible aid. But methods don't matter. Get Hunter!"

I began the search that same night, when Colonel Fearing let me question one of the captured saboteurs. The prisoner was an inoffensive little brown man named Diego Tamayo, who said he owned a curio shop in Santa Fe. There was no evidence that he had any expert knowledge about the handling of nuclear materials—which were dangerous enough, even to experts. But he had been arrested in a natural cavern near Valdes, where a large stock of unassembled components for plutonium bombs had been stored.

"Sure, mister, I'm a Mutationist," he told me. "I joined to save my wife and our baby and the little shop in Santa Fe. And I came to put a hex on

the atom bombs in the cave, because Mr. Hunter sent me. I didn't wish to damage government property, because I know the punishments are cruel. But Mr. Hunter said it must be done, to preserve the Earth."

"What equipment did you bring?"

"Nothing." He shrugged, and showed his empty hands. "Except a piece of chalk."

"How did you get inside the cave?"

"With that same chalk."

"I think you're lying," I told him.

"But I'll overlook it, if you'll tell me where to find Hunter."

"You will never find Mr. Hunter."

Diego Tamayo drew himself up straight. "He has gone to Russia."

"Another lie!" I tried to stare him down. "It's only last night that he escaped from the guardhouse here. The frontiers are all closed. He couldn't have got out of the country."

"I beg your pardon, sir." His mild brown eyes met mine steadily. "It is your misfortune to be mistaken. No frontiers are closed to Mr. Hunter. He can go anywhere he wishes."

"Anywhere?"

"Even to the stars," the curio dealer answered soberly. "With only a piece of chalk."

That was about all we got out of Diego Tamayo, but some of the former federal agents who had joined the Mutationists were still loyal enough to be more helpful. They convinced me that Eon had somehow actually escaped to Russia, but one of them told me that he was coming back to keep a date with

Carol Wakeman.

I was waiting when he came.

I had been sworn in as a special agent of the FBI, and trained to shoot an automatic. I was hiding with a county sheriff, in a Kansas cornfield, near a brush-grown prehistoric mound that Eon's followers had used for their queer new rites. Summer had come, by then. The war hadn't touched the farm, and a fine stand of growing corn screened us from the unpaved road.

"Listen!" Sheriff Blackacre pressed his leathery ear to the soil. "Here comes your spy!"

For all the fantastic things I had been hearing about Eon's way of travel, it was only a very ordinary gray Ford sedan that came jolting along the road. The driver was the former federal agent who had told us where to wait. He stopped near us just long enough to let Eon out, and then drove on hastily, as if ashamed of what he had done.

Eon waved at him, and waited by the road until the car turned out of sight. He wasn't armed, so far as I could see. Not even with a piece of chalk.

"That him?" The sheriff cocked his worn revolver. He was a stolid old keeper of the peace, with a tobacco-yellowed moustache and only a massive scorn for the newfangled notions of Eon's Mutationists. "Want me to wing him?"

"Not yet," I whispered. "Wait for the girl."

Eon was now striding toward the mound with an air of bright expect-

ancy, as if he expected to find Carol there. But when we stood up in the corn behind him, all I could see was the wide circle of wooden posts that the cultists had set around the crown of the little hill, and the flat stone inside, blackened where they must have burned some ritual fire.

"Ain't no girl," the sheriff muttered. "Nowhere."

"Eon Hunter!" I stepped out of the corn. "We've got a federal warrant for you."

My voice came out too high, and my hands were sweating on the automatic, but Eon turned and grinned almost as if he had been expecting me to hail him.

"Hullo, Guilborn." His grin faded, as he looked at me. "What has happened to you?"

These last months must have left their mark on me. The Mutationists had stalled the war completely, but how they had done it was still a monstrous mystery. Seemingly, they had somehow sabotaged the whole universe. The Russian nuclear weapons had failed along with our own. The spectral lines of distant stars had shifted, indicating changes in the atomic fires that kept them burning—impossible changes that must have taken place before the light left them, long before Eon was born. Even the luminous dial of my own wrist-watch had dimmed, as its trace of radium atoms ceased to disintegrate. I felt that the whole world I knew had crumbled down around me, and Eon must have seen my dazed desperation. But I nodded to the sher-

iff, and we moved toward him watchfully.

"We'll talk about you," I told him. "And Carol. Where's she?"

"Waiting for me." His dark eyes had a strange sardonic glint. "On the second planet of Altair."

"What?"

"Your dead pile of iron, back there at Valdes, wasn't the only road to space. We've found a better one. We've side-tracked all the old problems of fuel and mass and escape velocity that you rocketeers could never really solve. Even the speed of light is no limit now."

I stood gaping speechlessly.

"And I'm on my way to Carol."

No longer sardonic, his eyes had lifted toward something far beyond me. "She's waiting on a world I used to dream about, when I was just a boy. A place like the Earth must have been, before it was spoiled with science and machines." He looked abruptly back at me, and his thin face hardened with an old resentment. "But you saw it, when my father showed you my painting of her."

For a moment I could only hate him.

"Are you claiming you can create planets?" I managed to gasp. "Just by thinking them into existence?"

"Not yet." He shook his head regretfully, as if that had been an actual goal. "I doubt that human minds ever can. The truth is less extravagant. It turns out my dreams had been clairvoyant visions. All I had to do was find the planet."

"I don't know what your game is."

My incredulous annoyance was exploding into anger. "But I'm looking for Carol—right here on Earth. If you expect me to believe—"

"I don't," he said. "Because I know you're still convinced that two and two must always equal four. But I can't help feeling sorry for you. You're the same sort of misfit now, that I used to be."

"Never mind that." I tightened my sweaty grasp on the automatic. "But before we let you go riding off into interstellar space on any sort of broomstick, you've got a number of things to explain. First, we want to know how you and your fanatics managed to sabotage our atomic weapons."

"I explained all that a long time ago if you had only understood." He paused to make an odd little gesture at my gun, with his thumb and middle finger formed into a circle. "I didn't like the universe that you physical scientists had hammered together. A lot of other people didn't. So now we've changed it very slightly. If you want me to use your own mumbo-jumbo, we've simply removed the factors of mathematical probability that used to make certain elements unstable."

"How?"

"It's no use, Guilborn." His voice had softened strangely, almost as if with pity. "You won't find any scientific gimmicks. Because there aren't any. All we have done is begin using the spiritual powers of man—powers that you physical scientists always did your best to ignore or deny."

His quickened voice had a ring of awe.

"But they're tremendous, Guilborn! Men like Rhine, and even the older mystics, were only children groping in the dark. Even now, we've just begun to reach the other minds that are re-creating other worlds out through the galaxies. We're still only hoping to work toward communion with the first Mind, that was in the beginning—"

"That's enough mystical bunk!" Perhaps I was afraid to let him go on. "If all you've done is so noble, why did you have to run away to Russia?"

Anger flashed across his face, but then he shrugged tolerantly.

"I didn't run away," he said. "When our work was done in America, I went on to Russia to lead the Mutationist movement there. The materialists in the Kremlin had been as tough to convert as you physicists, but I found enough simple people willing to believe. You'll soon find that the Iron Curtain is being lifted, by liberated men."

"Huh?" I stood blinking at him, half convinced in spite of myself. "I can't understand —"

"You never will, until you unlearn your antiquated ways of thinking. Space and time are different now. You're out of date, Guilborn. Imagine a voodoo priest in your labs at Valdes—back when atomic fusion and fission were still facts of nature!"

"But I haven't time to help you now." He glanced restlessly up at that empty circle of posts on the

mound. "So long, Guilborn!" He waved his hand, in a hurried little gesture of farewell. "Carol's waiting —"

"Hold on!" I muttered. "We've got to take you back —"

But he was running toward the mound.

"Now?" Sheriff Blackacre leveled his revolver. "Wing him?"

I caught the sheriff's arm. "Let him go."

"Ain't we gonna take him in?"

"No, sheriff." I shook my head painfully; the old ways of thinking weren't easy to unlearn. "Because I guess he's right. He was right, all along. He has been the real hero of everything that happened. I guess I was always the villain. But it's not too late to let him go."

The sheriff holstered his gun reluctantly.

"It's your say-so," he grumbled. "It's no rat-killing of mine."

He stayed behind, but I followed Eon up the mound. My knees were weak, and a cold sweat had come out on my face, but if he had found a new way to reach the stars, I had to see it.

A rock rolled under my foot, on the brushy slope. I stumbled, and lost Eon. When I reached the ring of posts, he was inside. Something was smouldering on the black altar stone, and he was on his knees, scratch-

ing with a stick in the dust before it.

I stopped outside the posts, afraid.

Eon stood up, and stepped into the pentacle he had drawn. He was murmuring something I couldn't quite hear. Smoke billowed up from the altar. It filled the circle of posts, and blew out into my eyes. The mound seemed to tremble under me, as if from an earthquake shock.

And the altar stone was gone.

Beyond the row of posts lay another, larger stone. Carol Wakeman was sitting on it, beneath a flowering tree. She wore a lei of flowers, and she was feeding flowers to a fearsome beast that she clearly didn't fear.

"Carol!" Eon was shouting. "Can you hear me?"

She heard him. I saw her luminous smile, as she tossed the flowers to her monstrous pet and jumped up to meet him. Incredibly, across the unimaginable lightyears, I heard her joyous voice.

"Darling, darling —"

The smoke was in my eyes again. It swirled away, and left the blackened altar stone where it had been before. Carol and Eon were gone, with all their unknown world. I stood for a long time staring at the pentacle scratched in the dust, before I stumbled back down the mound, to begin trying to learn that two plus two can sometimes equal infinity.

THE END



Editorial

(Continued from page 5)

have been able to determine by actual observation. What is wrong?

Once more, let's go back to location. We have said the iron at the core of the Earth is solid, even though by rights it should at least be molten but more likely, a gas. Ignore theory. (At least partly). We've compressed things and observed two facts—one, that the compressed material heats up, and two, that it gets packed closer together, molecularly, is more solid, more dense. So let's extrapolate from our few facts, once more, and say the Earth's iron core is very solid. The iron there is *more* dense, more solid, than iron on the surface.

Now, here we go with our *plot*! Let's take this iron out away from the Earth's center—up to 50,000 miles. What *should* happen, based on the facts we already know? A continuation of the orderly progression we have noted! The iron, up there, should be *less* dense. It might even be a *liquid*. Melted. Flowing like water!

Let's go higher (we mean further). 100,000 miles away. Now our iron is boiling. It is becoming a gas. We have reached a point where the iron refuses altogether to be iron any more, but becomes a gas composed of atoms of iron.

(Concluded on page 57)

One last spurt away from Earth—and what do we extrapolate? Electrons and protons. Exactly the same electrons and protons to which we have already boiled our water.

Take any element. Change its *location* in regard to the center of the Earth, and we progress from very solid to very unsolid. All because of *where* we locate it! There you have the climax of our thrilling science fiction story, of our extrapolation of a known fact. There you have a new philosophy of why matter *is* matter, and not just electrons and protons (or even lesser things).

And the denouement? Suddenly we realize it isn't the Earth at all which controls all this, as the Earth *is* all these elements we have extrapolated into electrons and protons, and therefore cannot be the cause of itself. Who, then, is the villain? *Why* does water boil at less than 212° F. in the Andes mountains? What *other* manifestation does the Earth possess besides just matter? We *know* what it possesses—we have instruments, as simple as the compass, which tell us it has a magnetic field. Or rather, a magnetic field has the Earth. More properly, we must call it an electromagnetic field. And perhaps even more properly, says Einstein, we





Illustrated by Michael Becker

Do you believe in signs? The printed kind, we mean. Hawk didn't. So he had to learn the hard way that it doesn't always pay to be a

WISE GUY

By R. J. McGregor

THE SIGN said "No Smoking." Two little words. And it meant it. The Big Brass who ordered it posted didn't figure he had to explain there was aux-jet fuel around that might catch a spark and blow *Galaxy, Incorporated's* prime base here on Juno XVII all to hell.

So here was this red-headed recruit lieutenant—Bill Hawk—first-day-fresh from Galaxy Survey Academy, strolling around the wrong places on Indoctrination Saturday (Earthtime) a.m. with a hot weed in his face. They're rare here, these Wise Guys. Every Galaxy Grad has been taught a

thousand different ways to obey small regulations; knows why; has passed the toughest psych-screening known in man's universe. But occasionally one slips through.

Seconds later Big Brass had a nursemaid spy on Hawk, with (figuratively) a camera in one hand and a blaster with kill orders (literally) if necessary in the other. The problem boy formed a pattern: In one day he'd unconsciously posed sixteen times breaking a posted regulation, with each sign clearly visible in the snaps. The spy was good. Hawk's problem was defined: *He just didn't believe in signs.*

"Here's a guy we've all got to live with at least a year, and work with and fly with and map and explore with through god-knows-what—a guy who doesn't believe in signs. Fix him. Kill him or fix him, Klose," said the Big Brass.

"Yessir," I said, because he was talking to me, and because I'm base disciplinarian. Capt. Carl Klose.

Brass gave me till Monday night to finish with Hawk and faded off the screen. I sat there in the Specialty Photog office I alone occupied. A few of the ten thousand-odd officers and men on base were vaguely aware of my office. Some even knew that nothing ever seemed to be accomplished by Specialty Photog. But nobody but Big Brass and I were aware Specialty Photog was a dummy to cover me. Everybody knows there is a disciplinarian on every base.

They never know who he is.

We're practical in Galaxy. Top men to start with. Weed out ninety-five percent in the Academy. The investment in grads is so big it's secret. When you get a wise guy, you give him a chance. Not the textbook stuff. We call it Military Functional Psychology, and it dates back a million years. The misfit fits for the good of all—or dies. Some of our failures even get medals. All die "in line of duty" for home consumption, same as millions have since military outfits learned to write.

You get a notion of it at the Academy: There's the classical closed - atomic - pile - approaching - critical - mass problem (and solution). There's the airleak-in-the-spacesuit problem (and solution). And there's the alien-aid problem (with exemplary solution that a man washed overboard in the Calyx Ocean sinks like lead and survives only if he telepaths the big squids to piggy-back him to nearest landfall, which they do very much as Earth porpoises used to).

So where to start? Take a look at the misfit's record.

His record says he's a firebelly with an itch. High grades, model conduct. Naturally superior. Funny thing, his records show he won a combat commission in the tail end of the Second Deneb War. No injuries. Veterans schooling. Followed aptitude counsellor's advice and took a degree in Anthropology,

and must have hated it. Then sweated two Academy years for a third career. A whole new life. In my hands.

"An anthropologist," I thought aloud, "might have sound reason for a superior fix on MAN, and for man's myriad contrived, coerced, petty posted obediences . . . 'No Smoking' is a formidable insult to intelligence . . . but Man is emotion first, intelligence second . . . and the Anthropologist is only a man." Dead end.

No. I was looking too deep. In essence, Amalgamated Mankind had failed, through Hawk's stormy young life to dent his natural feeling of superiority. I wondered how much of it was purely physical. I could find out fast.

"A wise guy," I mused, taping my ramblings for a doublecheck playback later. "Not The-Cringing-Rebel; not The-Emotional-Infant, Exception-to-every-Rule (Hawk scrupulously obeyed ninety-eight percent by the spy's count). But the 'stupid' rule. The arbitrary law. The warnings that pewk and nag and quibble loud in bold red script and scream at you that you're human, fallable, forgetful, possibly unstable, stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid."

Progress.

"Now, where Amalgamated Man has failed, suppose an alien," I said, "an unsuspected alien . . ." Yes.

The three "classic problems" wouldn't phase him, I judged. And some of them are messy. As to

handy alien situations I had three. The Cythians and the Bluffers scare me to death. The things on Clovis VI don't. I merely hate them for personal reasons. Gawd how I hate Clovis VI. Probably it's because they know me, and they don't hate me. I suspect they know all about me. . . .

"Clovis VI," I said. I buzzed Big Brass. I played my tape for him. We discussed it two minutes.

"On Sunday," he said, fading.

Brass had an evil mind. Sundays Prime Base was a country club. Sunday duty crews were skeleton; notified a year in advance; paid doubletime, because it's good business policy. Sunday you sleep, play, go to the fights, movies, have women visitors with privacy if you arrange it in advance. Sunday you do as you damn please, obeying only the signs.

It was settled. Bill Hawk was a piece of cold meat to me. I didn't know him; didn't want to. It's easier that way. That night was Fight Night. Compulsory all hands. Last week's champ (who happened to have won ten weeks in a row) against anybody at all picked out of a random raffle hat. I had the referee make sure he pulled out of the hat a slip volunteering guess who?

We'd see about the physical part of it, if any.

Funny thing: not a man on base would have dared back down. Few would have even wanted to. We've got that kind of men. But Hawk.

He stood up in the fifth row, grinning, with three minutes to be back in the ring, ready. He made it. I was ringside. Champ could box and slug. Hawk could only slug. But it went the full ten rounds. And Hawk always coming back in, with that what-the-hell grin, always clowning. Guess who, along with everybody else, was jumping up rooting for the wise guy, most popular man on base?

I wished I hadn't fixed that fight. I've got a lousy job.

Later that night I went over alone and posted some signs—just three—at strategic points on Clovis VI; returned; tossed and turned.

IT WAS no problem getting Hawk off on the wrong foot. Early Sunday after dawn chow, which ninety per cent of the men passed up, a major catastrophe visited Hawk in the form of a Special Assignment major, who informed him he'd been detailed to accompany a certain Capt. Klose on a "mission" soonest to Clovis VI. That, alone, would have been a blow.

But consider Hawk's circumstance. The previous morning he'd been light-beamed with the full cargo of grads from the Academy, which is to hell and gone, after a full two years without women or visitors due to security, directly here. He'd had twenty-four hours Indoctrination Saturday. He'd looked forward to Country Club Sunday, and duty Monday. He'd

had two years of terse, torrid, censored communication from Academy Asteroid in which to arrange for visitors this particular Sunday. It had been my duty to glance over his communications. Thus I had expected something special. But the very young blonde woman clinging to his arm as the Major gave him the news, equalled in sheer animal beauty anything I'd ever seen, and I've made a career of such studies. Visitors, unfortunately, had to be off base bound homeward by six p.m.

"How long will we be gone," Hawk asked as I blasted off.

"Oh," I said thoughtfully, "till about six."

"And I'm signed on a six months trip tomorrow," he groaned.

"Lucky you," I said. Conversation died a while.

I just flew. Maybe I tried imagining a complete day of optional privacy with such a creature as I'd robbed him of—say after twenty-four months enforced celibacy. My thoughts strayed.

"Something's fishy," he said suddenly. "Sunday. Clovis VI is close to Prime Base. It's been mapped for ages. Besides, who's interested in it? Poisonous atmosphere. Uninhabitable!" He got vehement about it. "No oxygen," he said. "Stupid trip!"

Now, UNINHABITABLE is quite a word. It's what MAN always calls any place that doesn't suit him. It goes down in the Galaxy Log like that—UNINHABIT-

ABLE. And if anything *does* live in such a place, it's *got* to be stupid. Why? Man said so, that's why. No room for argument. That settles it. That's all.

There's a catechism in Galaxy, Inc., which incidentally employs only Earth Men. We've all had to learn it. Not in any exact words. But it goes something like:

. . . MAN, OR SOME NEAR RELATIVE OF MAN, IS UNIVERSAL IN THE UNIVERSE, AND EARTH-MAN, ABOVE ALL ELSE AND OTHERS, IS SUPREME. . . .

You know what I mean. You've heard its versions. You've heard the Martians and the other Sol people say it. And the hybrid Alpha people say it, and the Wolf people. It's one of those Great Universal Human Truths, like "Water is Wet." (I wonder what "wet" means on the worlds without humans or water?)

I was heading on a general course on instruments. Hawk sat there on my right, his square face blotched twice with purple puffs where the Champ had tagged him last night, his hair a butched swathe of distilled sun, the muscles along his jawline rippling an oval patch of lipstick. Leaning forward, frowning a bit, boiling inside.

Space was gems-on-velvet down-sun from Juno, and the whoosh and scream of the engines aft was muffled down. It's big out there. You know, because it says so in the manual, that outside is vacuum,

is nothing. But a man can't imagine nothing. He's been out in it in a pressure suit hoping to sixteen gods nothing pricks his little bubble. But if he's alive, he's never been in nothing; just the suit. The engines make a small, sweet sound like you're gliding sub-sonic in an aircar. You feel there's oceans of rich, thick, fragrant air all around. Most men always feel that way in space. Stellar distance scales you down to size. You can lose yourself and look and it's beautiful . . . but to Hawk, it's just chair-time and emptiness. He's bored. With the woman in the background I can't blame him. But I wonder if he's ever seen beyond the view-plates. He's taking his stolen Sunday too hard, and I'm glad, because I begin to build up the resentment I need against him.

I thought of ways to kill time, spend time on old VI till something happened. It's only sixty minutes over to Clovis VI, but always longer back, because no man belongs there. It's not so strange that none of the Earth books, or even Galaxy's manuals list the facts about Clovis VI. It's pretty natural. Because over there are things man can't understand. Never will. Crawling with a kind of life unknown, that keeps its secrets.

Someday men will blow old Clovis VI all to screaming hell. They'll have to. Not that Clovis will ever harm man. But we'll have to. I'd known about it six years, but I didn't know anything, really.

It's like that.

Space flying is a breeze for the right man. You learn it fast. It's no work. Mostly automatic. The catch is hazards plus the loneliness plus some Factor-X. Good spacemen are rare enough. Valuable. Worth salvaging. I sat there trying the impossible—to KNOW the wise guy. He was glancing over the charts.

"There's Clovis V and VI, both," he said, pointing ahead.

"Yeah," I said. I was veering too close to Clovis, a very warm sun. I started to reach up to activate the coolers and then changed my mind and arced three points to port, skirting the heat.

Hawk gave me a funny look. "Lose your nerve?"

"Regulations."

"Made to be broken," he snapped. "What the hell, let's get over there and finish the job, whatever it is."

"Photomapping," I said. "Suppose we crowded the sun and the coolers burned out?"

"We'd fry," he said absently.

"Sure," I said. "That means I commit suicide, I murder you with my carelessness, and I rob the company of the ship's value, plus their investment in two men. Or," I said, "I can take five minutes and skirt the heat with no risk."

He gave me a dirty grin and said, "I hope you live forever." Then he shrugged. "As for me, I've broken every rule I could since I was a kid—not out of meanness;

just because rules are for robots, for the blind, the brainless. Me—I'm a MAN! I can think up my own rules. But I hope you live forever."

It was a nice thought, but I'd never heard it delivered in quite that tone. I was busy. We were curving, arcing, braking in on Clovis VI orbit.

"Rules say I cut to yellow line," I said. "So here we go. Slow this way, isn't it?" I wasn't being sarcastic, exactly.

"I always come in on red line and blast the braking jets five bursts. Faster. Looks better. Feels better," he said.

"You've covered a lot of ground for a young guy. I took a routine glance, as senior officer on this mission, of your record this morning. You're just cocky because you've always played hunches that paid off. Like back in '23, June 5th. That big mass raid on Deneb. You and I were both in it, only I got blasted."

"A million guys in on it," he said. "Somebody had to get it." Like he'd known it was a small universe all along, but he grinned. "That's it, though," he said. "That's the difference between you and me. You're old. Over forty-five and on limited service with only the rank of captain. . ."

I didn't feel it necessary to explain my actual rank was Senior Colonel; that I was "Capt." Klose only for the benefit of reptiles like him.

"Look," he said, "I figure it, like this: If a man's got to play this game of living in the cockeyed cosmos, why not get in there and blast to win. Like you said I've covered some space for a young guy. Well, I'll keep up the pace. When I'm your age I'll be triple your rank. And you'll piddle along, playing it safe, missing all the good breaks, and why? You go by the book. You—" He broke it off and looked thoughtful. "Since when did you revive psychology, Klose? The thought crystallized. "If you want the story of my life I'll write you long, long letters next trip out. Pour out my aching heart—"

"Okay," I said. "Buckle in for landing."

That got him.

"If you can't land this can gently enough to skip the straps, dad," he said softly, "for chrissake let me take it in!"

"Okay," I said. "It's just a rule." I pointed to the instrupanel. "See there? It says in big red letters: **BUCKLE IN BEFORE LANDING.**"

"Real pretty red letters," he said.

"Forgive me," I said, and landed near one of Clovis VI's Green Spots.

I STARTED patching and snapping all the stays and lines and catches and connections on my fishbowl. I shoved on my space-mitts and issued him a live blaster and then tested my suit radio.

"You hear me?" I said.

He looked out through his faceplate.

"Real good." He tapped the atmosphere analyzer and shrugged. "So we've got argon for air. And we take pretty picture maps on Sunday." He clicked open the airlock passage. "Well, at least this outfit pays overtime."

We stepped inside the double lock and inflated our suits and waited for the pumps to work. Saves air. I might explain that Galaxy, Inc. is an exploratory outfit that follows up the astronomers and precedes the real estate and colonizing crowd and it's as military as the Navy. Wartime it *is* the Navy. As for everything else, it's got absolutely necessary routine regulations for leaving a ship, and for entering. With suits on you can leave or enter instantly in emergency—only. And since a spacesuit is actually a one-man spaceship, and since Clovis VI was listed as AAA under No Natural Hazards, and since even "emergency" has a Galaxy definition, it took two regulation minutes for the inner lock to seal itself and the pumps to shove the air back inside the ship, and for the outer lock to flop open with the solenoid flip and the counterweight.

Argon. Two steps down and we were walking on 3-D density Class-X real estate. Four-fifths Earth weight makes nice hiking.

Hawk slung the extra camera and its gear over his shoulder and

we started walking the half mile to the nearest Green Spot with him, naturally, striking out ahead. He mentioned how some meat-headed majors might know enough to issue shoulder jets on a trip like this. I made no comment.

I could see a few of the little green insects (we call them hoppers) busily spurting around. In some ways they remind you of the Earth Grasshopper, now extinct. Four inches long, no wings. But their strength-weight ratio enables them to hop enormous relative distances. They don't propel backward like a squid, or with any lobsteroid kick, but it looks that way. Because of their stance on the ground with what passes for a head, down and back, where men think abdomens ought to be, trailing the ground like a ship's tail-wheel, with their little hand-legs flailing around aft. And where you'd expect their heads, they're jutted out front like the muzzle of a toy field-gun with the barrel plugged and sawed off like a battering ram. They've got their four-jointed hopping legs on backward and they catapult or waddle around with the battering ram ends tilted up at a forty-five degree angle and going away. And their "heads" with the little strawberry-faceted eyes-that-apparently-aren't dragging along.

They just go about their little business that way. That's how they are. Some men claim they don't bother breathing argon, but they

can't prove it. Nobody ever will, either. I don't like to be laughed at, so I don't mention what little I know about Clovis VI to Hawk a la guided tour. He's impatient, trudging on ahead.

Funny sight, a guy in a suit walking. Looks exactly like a Martian brown ape with a big glass cookie jar crammed over its ears.

The poor guy. . . .

I'D PICKED this exact landing spot, within feet, last night. I'd been over here seven hours ago, and I'd posted three signs around. Just three. Maybe there should have been more. He came to my first sign. He stopped. I could see it was getting him.

"Hey," he called. "Some genius has posted a sign for weary travelers. **DO NOT STEP ON THE INSECTS**, it says. What the hell, they taxpayers or something?"

I caught up with him. He was standing there, looking down, bent over clumsily with one foot poised six inches in the air. A couple of the hoppers came close and he stomped down and missed one that whizzed away in a forty foot jump. But he came down squarely on the next.

Crack! The explosion was instant and sharp in my headphones.

"Jeez!" He was hopping on one foot. "Jeez!" he kept saying. "That damn bug exploded. Exploded. It exploded."

I could see his jaw sagging and his mouth loose and his eyes wide.

"Sign said don't step on 'em," I said.

I was grateful looks couldn't kill.

"It wasn't the bug," he said.

"Must have been a signal cap somebody had dropped there—that got buried with time. Maybe an old gas bullet."

"You going to stand there all day?"

"No," he said. "I'm going to—there's one!" He took a jump and came down with both feet and got another hopper.

Another explosion. This time he didn't hop, because the first time hadn't hurt, just shocked him. Again he backed off and looked where he had landed.

"There should be a squashed bug there," he said too quietly. "Only there's nothing. Just a little crater. Nothing—"

"I'll bet you can't step on another one," I said. "I'll bet a month's credits there's a bag-limit of two per customer on the hoppers."

He didn't say anything. He tried to squash one bug and then another. But now they avoided him. They stayed a good two jumps away.

"You," he said, pointing. "They're all around your feet. They're not afraid of you. But me!"

"Maybe they know I can read signs," I said. "Like the one back there that says **DO NOT STEP ON THE INSECTS.**"

Did you ever think you could hear the little wheels going around

in some guy's alleged brain? I thought I could hear faint little synaptic clicks inside Hawk's skull, but then he made a raspberry, loud and liquid. It fogged his faceplate.

"Hell," he said, exactly like an Anthropologist who hadn't quite reformed, "blind tropism. Colony insects with a radar sense of smell. They smell where I've squashed a couple and they don't like it, that's all. No odor on your boots."

That's what I admire about scientists. They've always got an answer.

I peered into his faceplate. "You give them credit for an esthetic sense, then? How would you rate them on a human I.Q. scale?" Right then I knew I'd asked the question too soon.

He looked back into my face, eyes narrowed, bleak as moon-dawn.

He said softly, "I think you're crazy."

I just said, "Come on."

A couple of hundred yards further was another sign. It said **WALK BETWEEN THE CURBS ONLY.** I heard him whisper, "Oh, no!"

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Don't tell me," he said too softly, "somebody's made this lousy planet into an insect zoo. Where's the turnstile. Where's the ticket window. Where's the hired guide—you?"

He'd put it in words. Suspicion flamed in his eyes, but the poor guy had no inkling what of.

From the little sign about curbs, the curbs began. Narrow, two inches high, parallel, four feet apart. They contained a fine pathway of hard-packed dirt that ran to the nearest Green Spot, ran around the Green Spot in a perfect ninety-degree-cornered two-acre quadrangle of cultivated-looking greenery that probably wasn't in the least biological.

It was just one of Clovis VI's Green Spots. One of hundreds. It's not strange Science didn't know about them. If Science had, it couldn't have understood, because it wouldn't have been allowed to study. Simple as that. So—nothing. Except perhaps spacemen are a trifle divorced from Science, enough to respect the alien property rights of the Clovis VI bugs—so long as the property is worthless to men. Maybe ten thousand spacemen knew about this place, and maybe (go ahead, laugh) the reason they'd never reported it was—sentimental. There are a lot of rough places in space. This one gave you a break, a fair shake that gambling men could appreciate. But imagine a scientific expedition here. Hawk had had enough government science crammed down his throat to warp his viewpoint; to make him demand textbook answers or nothing. Imagine a whole flock—a shiplot—of Hawks here. What they'd try to do. . . .

"Take a walk," I said. "Set up your tripod on that corner and

we'll take a pan shot first on radiation film. That's mostly what they want."

"Radiation!" He stared around the tight horizon, at the ground, as if he hadn't really seen the place before. And he hadn't. Seeing is an art.

I pointed around.

"See the little puffs of vapor coming out of the ground all over," I said. "Listen. You'll hear it underground. Helluva lot of atomic activity. Maybe partially volcanic."

We shut up and stood still and listened. The planet, like always, faintly throbbed, hummed, sang. The two-acre Green Spot rippled in the argon breeze. Around us the little hoppers went on about their business, not in ant-trains; not like bees.

Hawk made with a normal reaction comment:

"Who made this damned walk. And what in hell for?"

"Men didn't make it."

"You believe in spacegirls. They made it?"

"I wish they had," I said.

"Oh. Then the little bugs made it for us. Just for us. So we would walk around and look at them. But mustn't touch anything or they'll get indignant and blow themselves up just for spite under your feet—"

"Only two will," I said, but he was getting warmed up.

He broke out laughing. "And we must walk very, very carefully indeed not to disturb their delicate

atomic industries hidden around in the chuckholes." It was a dirty laugh. "And it's all a deep, dark secret and nobody knows about it but just us—and we aren't telling—"

He stepped over the curb and turned around and stepped back.

"See," he said. "The little atomic factories underground didn't stop and the little armies didn't rush out of the little buggy cities down in the holes. They didn't even come out and kill me, see—"

He was blazing. This was the kind of thing that insulted what he called his intelligence, a touchy portion of the guy.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

"You superstitious gloop!" he roared, because he knew damn well he could get away with it; one officer's word against another's, if I wanted to report it. He took a big breath.

"I've studied," he said. "I've been from one end of the galaxy to the other—even if I am young. I know the rule of life: It swarms infinitely in limitless variety. But only Man can think. Because only evolution turns the tune. One form survives to dominate from hell to breakfast. Bi-pedal, upright, vertebrate, flexible digits and opposed thumbs. Binocular tri-dimensional vision sunk in a protected braincase on top—where it's protected. Not dragging in the dirt, not jumping jacks, not battering rams—"

"Right," I said.

"And furthermore—"

"Who's arguing?" I said. "I forgot something. We're using radiation film first and I forgot the counter. Radiation varies around here, they tell me, enough so you need a counter. Might fog the films, or underexpose otherwise."

"Sure," he said.

"Sign down there at the Green Spot," I said, pointing. "Says **KEEP OFF THE GRASS**. I can read it from here in the telelens."

"Good eye, dad," he said as I turned back toward the ship. I didn't look behind me.

As I walked briskly, to my left was a fairly natural looking crater. Just about big enough to bury the kind of scientific expedition scout yachts you see now and again. One had landed on that spot six years ago, so they tell me, just a month before I'd first visited old VI. It must have been allowed to do a certain amount of poking around. It must have exceeded the local limits of good taste, who can know. Clovis VI is pretty big, as its class goes, so you wouldn't notice. But if you search, you can find similar craters in the surface all around. Strangely enough, it's a naturally smooth planet, except for exactly the same number of craters as unreported scientific expeditions in this area from all over the universe, so they do say.

I kept walking. I couldn't read his mind. I was thinking I'd been wrong hoping Hawk's wise-guy fix could be blasted so simply as by showing evidence that a bug might

be Man's equal. Maybe something as simple as the Anthropologist "Man Almighty" idea made him feel even superior to his fellow men and their silly rules. I didn't know. I was tired. I didn't even care any more.

I HAD no other reason for going to the ship than to leave Hawk alone and armed with my third sign: **KEEP OFF THE GRASS.** (Understand this: The signs I put there. Nobody built the curbed walk.)

It took two minutes, non-emergency, to pump the airlock free of outside argon and let me inside the ship proper. Then, through a port I could see Hawk panning the camera where he'd set it up at the proper corner of the Green Spot. So I set up an ordinary motion colorcam aimed toward him for the official record, and waited.

Ten minutes passed and nothing. Then he called to me through the helmet radio. I cut off my send-switch and listened.

"Come on back," he said, twice. "What the hell's keeping you?"

Maybe he'd come back thinking I'd had an accident. I took care of that by saying:

"I'm running a compass-check. Relax."

"Oh, great," he said, knowing it would take at least twenty minutes to complete such a check.

I cut my send-switch off again and I got out as many first aid items as I figured might save him.

It all depended on the enormity of his violation now, and I didn't know the rules. I only knew what he knew: That in case of any unexpected enemy attack—retreat. Fight later on your own terms. The rule saves Galaxy a lot of money.

Three minutes he stewed out there. Through telelenses I saw and filmed him. He'd look at the sign, then turn his faceplate toward the ship and his helmet antenna would wiggle like he was shaking his head sadly.

Then he bent over the curb, the small, unearthly curb and out over the edge of the Green Spot, peering closely at what grew there. There wasn't much to look at, really. The stuff was growing.

It had single blades, like grass, about eight inches tall. Green like young corn sprigs, flexible. I recall some men told tales of plucking a handful and finding its roots were tiny wires that went straight down somewhere and flared incandescent on plucking. I recall someone saying the grass blades felt metallic, heavy, wriggly like certain reptiles.

Maybe he had a big smile on that almost handsome mug. Maybe he was thinking in terms of a semi-floral bouquet for his pining lady when he reached down and picked some. Not just a blade; a handful.

He waded out in the Green Spot, lifting his boots high, three steps, and harvested his posies, like a man should.

Give him credit. He could have

used his blaster. He was smarter than that. He didn't fight. The great big superior intelligence—MAN—started running like all hell.

Hawk probably broke all records for suited men on 3-D smooth planets getting back to the ship. He was wheezing, and he'd yeowl. Sometimes he screamed.

I couldn't see them through my telelens. Not clearly at first, because they were too far away and moving too fast. But when he arrived at the ship I let my camera take it all in alone. I even closed my eyes.

"Let me in!" he screamed.

I flipped my send switch, wondering if he'd try to blast in. My hand was shaking.

"What's up?" I said, trying to sound sleepy. He wasn't an audience to be critical of my performance.

"For godsake, hurry."

"Okay," I said. "I'm starting the pump. Two minutes."

"Not the damn pump. *Emergency!*" I could hear his boots beating the ground via radio. They were getting to him.

"Un-uh," I said. "Nothing out there but those little bugs. Nothing there classified emergency. I go by the book."

I could hear him pounding on the outer lock through the mike.

"I tell you they're killing me," he shrieked.

"They can't be. You're in a suit. Grasshoppers—"

The pump was shining, a red two-minute hand sweeping around.

"A-h-h-h-e-e-e!"

That one must have scored a vital spot.

"One more minute," I said. "Fifty-eight seconds."

"Let me in now," he blubbered, "or I'll kill you when I—ow-w!"

"Take it easy," I advised. "I'm not taking a chance on ruining a ship full of instruments with a pressure surge and this cockeyed atmosphere. Twenty seconds."

Those suits we both were wearing were wonderful. Because every time they'd score one, the self-sealer would flow around the wound and his oxygen would spurt to equalize, even with him jumping like a Martian Bouncer.

I could see his face, then. I actually ached for the guy. Because they were in for the kill. Not against me—nor the ship. Just him. The last ten seconds ticked off. I opened. He burst through and collapsed, fainting. They respected my rights and let it end there. I saw he wasn't bleeding too much. I jabbed a hypo through his suit and ended his agony. I flew him back to the hospital unconscious.

HE WAS there in the special room I'd arranged just off the emergency ward.

I said "Hi."

"You won't believe this," he said. "Nobody would. Maybe I'm crazy. But those hoppers. Those reverse-grasshoppers with the head in the

dirt and the battering ram-tails up forward. Those four-inch demons." He stared at me with enough intensity so it got to me, including part of his pain. "Those bugs," he said, "were people!"

"No," I said.

"Civilized," he hissed. "You know why they blew up? I do." He closed his eyes. "And you do, too. Each was a soldier-citizen voluntarily carrying a tiny atomic explosive so that if he were captured, or hurt, or killed, no part of him could be found to yield his people's secrets. They even let me kill two and didn't retaliate. But when I jammed up their energy field under the Green Spot—that was too much."

"Take it easy," I said. "Healing rays can fix you in no time."

"Nobody believes me," he groaned. "I've had my tail shot full of bullet-sized atomic craters while WEARING A SUIT and nobody believes me!" He sat up, groaned, and sank back.

"Listen," he said. "They followed me all the way to the ship. Millions of them, but only a dozen or so were sent after me. They hopped in formation till I got outside the ship. Then they broke ranks. Formed into squads. Aimed at my fanny for a while, firing volleys. Then they fired at will. I could see them in my telelens. They had *little hands*," he said. "Hands. And in the hands—rifles. I could tell by the bursts—atomic."

"So what else is new," I said.

"There was a sign there. And plain as day the sign said **KEEP OFF THE GRASS**. This always happens."

He heard me, but it hadn't quite registered.

"Those hoppers," he said. "Brains are in their tails—and they're egotistical enough to expect ours to be there too—" He lapsed into pure thought. His suspicions flooding back. He stared. "You say this . . . always . . . happens."

"Except that guys who fight back sort of—disintegrate."

Now, I wouldn't have done this for just anybody, but I owed him something. So I unbuckled my belt and dropped my pants and showed him the craters and scarred pits where they'd blasted me six years ago when I was young and fresh from the wars and very, very wise. There'd been an older officer who'd taken me over there on a ridiculous "mission" on a certain Sunday morning.

"I suspected," he said. "I honestly did. Had a funny feeling about you—"

I belted up the pants and between us there passed a look of remarkable understanding, admixed with hatred and amusement.

It's known all base disciplinarians rank colonel or higher.

"You're good, Colonel," he said.

I'd thought of one more touch.

"I did suspect you," he said. "I can prove it."

I flipped out a cigarette and waved a match.

"Behind you," he said. He was grinning but he meant it.

I knew the sign behind me said **NO SMOKING**. I looked and read it anyway, and put away the smoke.

"It's only four o'clock Sunday," he said. He rang a bed buzzer and his visiting blonde came in with

that smile. "This is Doris," he said. "I told her to steal the sign, just for your benefit."

She held it up. On one side it said **DO NOT DISTURB**. On the other side it said **MEN WORKING**.

"Goodbye, Wise Guy," I told him, and it was a compliment.

THE END

Editorial

(Concluded from page 41)

must call it an electro-gravitational field. (Or whatever Einstein is saying in his new Unified Field Theory, which makes magnetism and gravitation only two manifestations of what is actually a single entity.)

Now, having discovered the villain, we can predict his fate. We can consign him to the "electric chair" for his crime. We accuse him of boiling water at lower temperatures in the Andes than he does at sea level because of its location. We accuse him of annihilating matter by removing it from the center of the Field. We say it is all his fault! He is the Field! The culprit is named!

But wait—he isn't a criminal at all! He cannot be said to murder the same matter he has brought to life! He is its creator! It is his! He can do with it as he likes. Even we are his. We are his subjects. And by boiling water at lower temperatures in the Andes, he has given us a plain warning. He has "fenced us in." He has said: "Stay

put, or you will cease to exist as matter! Stay where you are, or I'll *boil* you! Boil you to a gas; convert you to your original electrons and protons!"

The prediction? We know you won't like this! You've read hundreds of stories about space travel. You are even today trying to find a way to make those stories come true. So you'll scream bloody murder when we say that the *facts* already known indicate it is impossible. For as you change your location in the Field, you'll boil away to nothing—you and your rocket ship and your very molecule and atom! You're stuck!

Unless you can find a way to circumvent the natural progression of "boiling away" by some such means as old Mother Earth keeps her molten core from giving out with great big bubbles!

There's a "spare tire" for you scientists to figure out for your space buggy! And you'd darned well better, or we say you'll regret it! There're nails in your trail, bub!

THE EDITORS

FLIGHT TO UTOPIA

By Jan Journeau

Utopia . . . Where is it? What is it? Maybe it all depends on your point of view. And would the Utopia of one generation satisfy the dreams and longings of the next?

Illustrations by Charles Hornstein

WITH the rubber eraser of his pencil, Commander Jonas Wesley abstractedly tapped that morning's copy of the *Campus Gazette* lying on the aluminum desk before him. Then he looked up at his son sitting opposite.

"Mark . . ." he began. But then he broke off. What actually did he want to say? That he sensed a vague unease on the ship? It was no more than that, surely.

He began again. "You and I've always been pretty close, Mark."

"Yes, Dad." Mark smiled encouragingly at his father.

The Commander studied his son's features. Frank and open, with friendly, dark eyes; healthy, with a clear complexion and pleasant brown hair. A man now by law; just over twenty-one. Yet to him Mark would always be his boy, his youngster.

Commander Wesley glanced away, his eyes brushing over the walls of the small chart room that

also served as his study. His gaze fixed itself on a porthole of treble panes. Outside he saw only blackness with pinpoints of light.

"I don't like to ask you to do this," the older man continued, "because I've never believed in anything but open and aboveboard methods. Yet . . ."

"Yes, Dad?"

"Well, you're of the younger generation, of those who've become men on the ship." He turned his glance back, then pulled his chair closer and leaned forward. "I'm out of touch with them, Mark. I don't know what they're thinking. And I believe it's true of all of us older people. I've talked to the teachers and the doctors and the ministers. None have really helped me. Couldn't, I suppose." He paused. "I believe you can."

"How, Dad?"

Before going on Commander Wesley pulled out his cigarette case and tendered it to his son. Mark chose one. "Thanks."



As he exhaled the first rich smoke, the older man leaned back. "How can you help me? By going among your fellows and finding out what they're thinking, what they talk about, what their opinions are." He put up his hand to anticipate any objections. "Nothing like spying, mind you. You know I abhor anything like that."

Mark was studying the end of his cigarette.

His conscience was clear, but the Commander felt the need for justifying himself. "After all, as head of our little community, it's not only my right but my duty to know what our people are thinking and doing—particularly the younger generation."

Mark looked up. "That's right, Dad." Then he gestured toward the paper on his father's desk. "But we have our student papers and magazines, our Youth League debating forums once a week, articles, books, talks. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know," Commander Wesley interrupted him. "I get all those—but somehow they don't satisfy me."

There was silence between them.

Mark broke it. "Do you—suspect anything?" he asked.

"No-o-o," Commander Wesley admitted. "It's not nearly as strong as that. But with the election only three months away, I sense a kind of restlessness among the young people, something indefinable which I feel they don't want to reveal." He paused, looking at

Mark. "I don't quite know how to put it."

Then he laughed, a short, embarrassed laugh, placed his hands on the desk and rose. "Oh, I dare say it's all in my imagination. Just see what you can do, Mark, that's all."

"All right, Dad. I will." Mark got up to go. "See you for dinner, Dad."

Left alone, the older man stubbed out his cigarette, sank back in his chair and placed his feet on the desk. His rank of Commander was gained in the Navy, and one could still detect the influence of the sea which had shaped him in his youth. He was a strong, tall and broad man, with heavy-hewed, bluff features, a ruddy complexion and grey hair. Those who came into contact with him instinctively recognized his right to dominate any group of which he was a member. His orders were sharp. Few ever disobeyed them, except to their cost.

He was now studying the astro-navigational chart on the wall near the porthole. It showed their route. To the left was Earth, to the right their destination, planet X15, about one hundred light years away. A small red symbol of a rocket marked their present position. He looked at it somberly. It would soon be ten years that they had been hurtling through interstellar space at nearly half the speed of light, yet they had covered barely five percent of the two

hundred years necessary for their journey. If the map had been of an Atlantic crossing to Europe, he thought moodily, their ship would now be scarcely south of Nova Scotia.

He placed his feet down on the floor again, drew up his chair and hunched over the desk. They had all known that it could only be their fifth or sixth generation of descendants which would effect the landing and begin the arduous task of settlement. They had known it, but not realized it, was what it amounted to. In the enthusiasm and fervor of dedication, in the ceremonies of taking the pledge, they had somehow considered it irrelevant that it was *they* who would have to live—and die—in this tritium-powered shell of steel and glass; that they personally would never experience the fulfillment of their mission.

He got up and stood before an internal window which overlooked the central steel square stretched out below him. It shone clean and aseptic, full of hurrying figures going about their business. This ship was large all right, he reflected, comparatively speaking. It had the equipment of a complete, self-sufficient community, as thoroughly planned as a generation of highly-skilled men had been able to devise.

Pensively he scanned the scene. The chart room in which he stood was located at the very top and left of his house, next to the outer

shell. From this eminence he now considered the public auditorium and town hall, the maternity hospital, the courthouse, the crematorium, the entertainment and sport palace, the church, the deck-promenade, the schoolhouse and university building, that surrounded the square. Then his glance moved upward and rearward to the Hydroponics Institute, with its upper three levels devoted to edible and industrial plants. To the left of it stood the livestock quarters and the dairy farm. Behind him and to the right, and extending the length of the ship below the square, he knew there were the tritium reactor motors, the artificial-gravity inducer, the water and air producers, the utilities. And in tiers and tiers above and around the public buildings, clinging to the concave outer shell, were the neatly numbered 'houses' of the inhabitants.

There were now over five thousand of them, an increase of something like eight hundred and fifty over the original pioneers. Some had died, many more had been born.

He leaned his forehead against the windowpane. It was good, clean lives they all led. Harmonious lives, dedicated to a high purpose.

As he stood looking, the first children began to emerge from the schoolhouse. Soon a swarm poured out, swinging satchels and books, their merry shouting reach-

ing him faintly. With a smile he watched them run in streams to the escalators, funnel into them and be carried in a thin line to the various levels, there dispersing and skipping to their homes. They would be met by their fond mothers, given their suppers, told a story by their fathers when they returned from work. Considering the circumstances, life was good; the astral ship, a happy band.

He frowned. Two recent cases of hysterical claustrophobia had worried him considerably. The psychologist had not been of much help, shrugging his shoulders, remarking, "If they could get outside they'd be automatically cured."

Suddenly he clenched his fists. Just to be outside—just one walk through his native Vermont woods, over field and hills! Then he collected himself with an effort, brushing away the momentary access of weakness. He knew that outside there was only the black, interstellar cold, unimaginably freezing.

Outside! The unfortunate case of his best friend Jimmy Wallender, two years ago, came to his mind. Temporarily deranged; the court had brought in the correct verdict. Poor Jimmy, sneaking past the waste-disposal workers, hiding among the collected crematorium ashes and being shot out by rocket power. What had he hoped to achieve? The rocket served to immobilize the forward momentum, to disengage the waste—the

only kind they could afford not to re-use—to disengage it from the astral ship and leave it nearly a hundred thousand miles behind them in a second. Was Jimmy still afloat in the lightless void, surrounded by suspended ash, frozen as solid as a diamond? Jimmy Wallender's case had had an unsettling effect. It was months before they forgot it. He remembered the jokes—about going back to pick him up. Quick-frozen, they said; thaw him out in the heating plant.

He turned from the window and paced about the room. People were unfeeling. Then he sat down and glanced at the chronometer. He had a few minutes more.

Ten years! He stooped down and pulled out a drawer of the desk, taking from it a neatly-labeled envelope. He extracted some photographs, spreading them out on the desk. There was Mark, eleven years old. He smiled when he remembered the boy's enthusiasm. And there was Muriel, his wife, her eyes alight, face proud, erect of figure in her smartly-tailored suit, receiving a bouquet from the President. He looked up momentarily; how keen she had been, how devoted to the venture. Another photograph showed the astral ship. He had not seen its outside since then. He took a deep breath as he realized he never would again.

He leaned back, closing his eyes, reliving the hectic days. The Presi-

dent and his whole cabinet, the military heads, national leaders in all walks of life—the whole nation it seemed—had gathered in the burning New Mexico desert. The astral ship lay in its cradle at a forty-five degree angle, huge and glistening in the brilliant sunlight, visible to the approaching throngs for miles before they reached it. It was the pride of the nation, this enormous vehicle. It represented twenty-seven years of work, of dedication, of supreme national effort. It was the proof of their determination, of their bold imaginations; proof of their skill in technology and science.

The ceremonies had been impressive and protracted. They had taken a whole week. On the final day the pioneers—men, women and children—drunk with joy and pride, had paraded past the Presidential stand for the last time. They had filed up the ramp into the ship as thousands cheered and waved flags, the music of massed bands blaring farewell. He himself had brought up the rear. All the official speeches were over, but the Chief Executive had not let go of his hand till he had imparted a last message to him alone. The phrases in the President's low, earnest bass, likening him to a twentieth century Columbus, entrusting the mission to him and to God's protection, still rang in his ears. The Commander had mounted into the ship with tears of pride unashamedly streaming down his

face.

Then they were sealed in. The vast crowd surging round them had begun to move away to a safe distance. The astral ship had stayed on the ground the whole of that afternoon, the entire night, the whole of the next morning. The engineers outside made last minute checks with their opposite numbers inside, gearing the complex machine for its first and supreme effort.

Inside they had known that it would take that long. Nevertheless they had been restless, waiting impatiently in the crazily-angled interior, in a fever pitch to be off.

Finally the last O.K. had come through. The ship had trembled as the tritium motors roared into power. The rise was going to be gentle, they had been promised. And it was. With his arm tight round Muriel's shoulders he had watched from the porthole in this very room. At first the desert—yellow and vast—had been distinguishable to its last cactus and yucca plant in the afternoon sun. Then it had become a sheet of blinding beige as they slowly rose higher, even the crowds and installations no longer visible. They had seen through the clear air an everwidening panorama: the very curvature of the earth, the shadow of night creeping over the surface. Soon they were outside the atmosphere, the sky black, the Earth a half-moon.

After twelve hours their arti-

ficial-gravity inducer was turned on. There was up and down again. He called for an assembly. The crowd of pioneers gathered in the steel square to hear him. It was then that he had issued the decisive order, loudly, exultantly shouting: "DIRECTION PLANET X-15. FULL SPEED AHEAD." The tremendous shout of their frantic cheers had risen strongly above the noise of the motors.

They had roared along, attaining ever greater speed. The acceleration had continued for two days and nights. "Ninety thousand miles per second," had been the last report of the Chief Engineer. To the untutored eye their mother Earth was already indistinguishable from other stars and planets in the sky.

Then the engines had been shut off and a sudden vast silence had pervaded the astral ship. And the silence had continued since then; uninterruptedly for ten years. Had it not been for a slow change in the constellations as they viewed them from a different angle, they might have thought themselves stationary, suspended in a vacuum.

He glanced at the chronometer again. It was time. He turned and pressed a button. Out of the aluminum desk a microphone rose mechanically. He put his hand round it, waiting a few moments. Then he pressed a lever at the microphone's side. "Commander Wesley, Chief Executive Astral Ship reporting. Daily report number..."

He went on into the technical details required, but it could all have been summed up as, "Everything normal. Nothing new to report."

As the microphone sank into the desk he wondered idly of what use his daily messages really were. The one tonight would take five years to reach its destination. Would the frail beam ever make it across that vast space? He could only know in another fifteen years time. And then ruefully he reflected that Earth's interest in their fate waned in proportion to the distance between them.

How much more avidly did they on the ship devour the news from Earth, although 'news' was hardly the term. Earth's reports had at first spoken of nationwide rebroadcasts of their messages from the ship. At first every community that had a representative on board had relayed greetings and reported its local happenings for the benefit of its exiles. Such occasions had become progressively rarer and had ultimately been discontinued. Perhaps they had forgotten, or just didn't care; perhaps they were too busy with living to remember their distant ship, except officially, from time to time. The national anniversary ceremony round the memorial erected at their place of take-off in New Mexico was more thinly attended each year. In a bulletin he had received a year ago—corresponding to about four years after their departure—he had learnt that the annual event

had been transferred to Washington, D.C., to spare people the nuisance of traveling.

Suddenly he felt hungry. He looked once more at the chronometer. Dinner would be in a quarter of an hour, punctually at five thirty. He smiled to himself. Muriel insisted on Vermont customs. Slowly he replaced the photographs, folded the paper, took a last look to see that everything was shipshape and then left the chart room and went downstairs into his house, the White House as they called it.

DINNER was the usual quiet meal. Commander Wesley sat at the head, Muriel at his right, Mark on his left.

"How do you like the salad, Jonas?" Mrs. Wesley asked her husband. A little anxiously it seemed to him.

He chewed the tomatoes for a moment and then reached for the salt. "A bit tasteless, don't you think?"

"I was afraid you'd say that." She shook her head. "I think they forgot to put in one of the minerals, or too much radiation. I don't know what it was, but all the vegetables have been bad for the past month or two."

The Commander reached for a piece of bread. "I'll have to speak to Thompson about it."

"Oh, you needn't bother, they're all going to complain to the Hydroponics Institute, to Thompson. I

heard them discussing it at the grocer's."

"Well, there's no harm in a good complaint every so often. Keeps everyone on their toes. Good for the administration."

"Perhaps it's not his fault. Maybe we're just bored with artificially-grown food." She paused. "My, when I remember our Vermont tomatoes!" Her face lit up; she closed her eyes. "So sweet, so red."

The Commander looked at her sharply. Sighs for things on Earth, comparisons, were bad for morale. They were officially frowned upon. And coming from the first lady!

He chewed thoughtfully. There had lately been a growing slackness in this respect, among the older people especially. Their papers and magazines reflected it. But, then, it was difficult to find a right road between sterile reminiscence and the educational necessity of giving the younger generation a true picture of Earth to pass on to their descendants. After all, nostalgia was natural, he reflected. He himself—at odd periods when his consciousness was not completely subordinate to his will, as in twilight moments between wakefulness and sleep—he himself had found his thoughts wandering in that direction. A sense of bewilderment and strangeness would overcome him. A sudden, painful questioning as to why he was here; a nearly physical, insistent yearning for Earth. At such times he had to

make a supreme effort to dominate his feelings. To let oneself go was fatal for someone in his position.

As a result of several of these worrying personal experiences and reports of the general tendency, he had had a series of conferences with the Director of Public Instruction. Ever greater emphasis was to be placed on the future, on the tasks that lay ahead. A soft-peddalling on the merely sentimental news from Earth; careful editing of the bulletins. They had agreed to that program. But then the Director had stupidly remarked that it was difficult to keep peoples' minds on an objective one hundred and ninety years ahead. He had exploded. Of course it was difficult. But that was precisely his job. If he felt incapable, there were others. . . .

"Dad," Mark broke into his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Have you decided to run again?"

Commander Wesley broke a piece of bread and placed it in his mouth. It was a little difficult to imagine himself on the ship as an ordinary citizen, no longer Chief Executive, no longer in the White House. Yet he also wanted a little peace—not leisure, that he had in plenty—but peace of mind, unloading of responsibility. What the Director had said was, of course, perfectly true. It was getting more and more difficult to keep peoples' minds on the main issue, even to

invent distractions to keep them healthily occupied. Overcoming unforeseen problems was, after all, the essence of life for the average man and woman. But the astral ship had been so well planned, so efficiently executed, that problems were virtually at a minimum. Their lack, paradoxically, was his own gravest problem. Perhaps it had been a mistake to organize everything so perfectly.

Their only real interest lay in their growing children, in the process of teaching them the skills and knowledge which was their heritage. The children provided the sole changeable element. All else was enervatingly, monotonously similar. But even the youngsters afforded the minimum of worry and distraction. There was no illness on the germ-proof ship.

"No, Mark, I haven't quite decided," Commander Wesley said at length.

His first Presidential term of five years had been by appointment. He had won his second term by an almost unanimous vote. The Constitution, engraved in aluminum in the west side of the square, allowed him to be a candidate for one more five-year term. Then, after skipping five years, he could theoretically be a candidate again. But he was already fifty-five. . . .

He turned to Mark. "I'll have to make my mind up by the end of this week. That's the deadline." He turned his attention to the roast beef.

"I hear there's going to be a new party," Mark said quietly.

The Commander stopped chewing. He looked at his son. "New party? What new party? Whose party? What platform?" The inquiries shot out of him.

Mark was toying with his fork.

The Commander swallowed his mouthful. "Come on, boy; out with it."

"A youth party. A new, radical program."

This was the first the Commander had heard of it. It nettled him not to have been the first to know, months ago; to discover it a mere week before the campaign began. It was an impertinent challenge. "And what's the program?" he asked gruffly.

"It'll be announced in a week, at the same time as the candidate."

So, he was not to be told even now. Impudent pups. "Why all the secrecy? Who are the leaders? Who's the Presidential aspirant?" He put down his knife and fork. "Why don't I know all this? I want to know. I have a right to know." He glowered at his son.

Mark looked up and smiled. "Relax, Dad. Don't get so het up."

Mrs. Wesley placed a hand on her husband's arm. "Come on, Jonas, finish your food. It'll get cold."

He turned to his plate. Of course, they were merely children. It was good for them to show interest in politics. But a new party? Morosely he wondered

whether the Chief Engineer or the Dean had a hand in it. Both had been dropping hints about the need for fresh blood.

What new-fangled ideas would these youngsters propose? In all probability revival of the old chestnut about everyone switching jobs to provide variety. Or the fallacious proposal to shorten the day by speeding up the clocks, to make time appear to pass more swiftly. Those would be the kind of typical, unworkable, irresponsible campaign promises. Not, of course, that there was the slightest possibility of anyone voting for them, but the whole matter would have an unsettling effect. If a wedge into their harmonious existence was once introduced—God only knew what the consequences might be. It could cause stresses in the delicate fabric of the community that would ultimately tear the ship apart.

A new party implied adverse criticism of his administration and captaincy. It was the first time his authority was going to be challenged. Well, he would not allow opportunists among the older people to exploit a potentially dangerous situation. The welfare and stability of the community had been entrusted to his care. He would not fail that trust as long as it was constitutionally possible for him to do so. Commander Wesley knew that his decision to run again had crystallized at that very moment.

Muriel smiled nervously. She must have noted his agitation. "You know, Jonas, the young people must have their chance too. They're entitled to have their say in public affairs."

He looked at her angrily. "And who said anything different? We're grooming the young people for leadership. In our party. There's Mark, for one. Then Charley Hughes, Tom Simpson, young Jimmy Wallender. Why, I'm the first one to admit that young people must increasingly be given greater influence. It's only natural, after all; you couldn't stop it, as a matter of fact. But it's got to be orderly and gradual, within the recognized parties. They must first gain a sense of responsibility. This talk of a new party is nonsense."

There was silence at table. The three of them sat still, each absorbed in his thoughts.

Mrs. Wesley rose to remove the plates and dishes and came back from the kitchen with the dessert.

"I'll go to the voters on my record," the Commander continued. "I dare anyone to criticize my administration justly and at the same time unfavorably. Considering our circumstances what more harmonious community could there be—what happier life? Crime has been at a minimum. Drunkenness well within limits. Our civic organization is a model of perfection. No community of equal size on Earth has a better record. What change could possibly improve it?"

He looked at the two of them challengingly—his wife, his son. Both were bent over their plates, eyes cast down.

Suddenly a feeling of great weariness swept over him. Cooped up in this damned machine; hurtling through a vacuum to his death. Meaningless. He must have been mad to volunteer twelve years ago, to sweat up for the competitive exams, to pass the fitness tests, to attend the astronavigational college, to work every minute of the day to beat the other candidates, to burst with pride and joy when the newspapers of the nation blazed his name in headlines as Congress' final choice. Insane!

Then he wrenched these thoughts from him. Slowly he conquered himself, glancing out of the corners of his eyes at his family. Good. They had noticed nothing.

No, if it had been worthwhile then, it was worthwhile now. It was only natural to feel discouraged every so often, to feel the weight of ennui as no longer bearable; to be struck with fear at the sudden, lucid picture of their self-imposed destiny. They were but frail human creatures, protected from the limitless void by a thin shell of their own construction. They needed cheering and encouragement, and the source of it was to keep ever-present before them the consciousness of their historic role. He smiled to himself wryly. Pilgrim great-great-grandfathers, as the joke had it.

"Does that mean you've definitely decided to run?" Mark asked slowly.

"Yessir, it does. And with the campaign I'm going to put on, I don't see anyone coming within a mile of beating me. And then," he paused a moment, "although I haven't done it till now, I know how to be a politician too. I've never used my power, nor will I misuse it now. But as President I control over two hundred key appointments. If I drop a hint I'm sure I'll get all the votes I need. If I choose to do it that way, no one can beat me, and well they know it." He bit his lip. "And I think I *will* choose to do it that way, just to make sure. And I'll choose my successor too," he added as an afterthought.

Commander Wesley and Mark stirred their coffee as Mrs. Wesley busied herself clearing the table.

"Mark."

"Yes, Dad?"

"I want you to go out tonight, to the young people's clubs. I want you to find out all you can. The names of the candidates, the program; how serious they are; what following they have; what their strength is. I want you to find out everything. I'm sure you can if you try." This was no longer a request, but a command. "You're supposed to be one of the bright stars of this much-touted younger generation. You're very popular personally. I hear it from everyone daily. It's inconceivable that you can't find

out if you make it your business to do so."

Mark stood up. He paused momentarily at the back of his chair, and then pushed it in to the table, as if he had reached a decision. "O.K., Dad."

The Commander heard him gong through the hall, opening the front door onto the porch which dominated the great steel square. Then the door clicked shut.

ALLOWING them time to finish their meals with their families, the Commander set about summoning his heads of Departments to a conference. In the easy and familiar way he handled matters of state on the astral ship, the Commander talked to his cabinet ministers via the communications instrument in the chart room. "Is that you Bill? Step over here, if you would. Yes, at about eight should be O.K. Call Henderson and Baines for me, will you?" Then he buzzed the operator again. "Get me the Chief Justice. Hello, Henry?" And so on.

The President and Mrs. Wesley welcomed the men in the large downstairs conference room—the Director of Public Instruction, the University Dean, the Chief of Internal Security, the Production Head, the Chief Engineer, the Chief of the Press Bureau . . . all twelve of them. At precisely eight fifteen the familiar faces were grouped round the large table, looking expectantly at the Chief

Executive.

"Gentlemen," the Commander announced, "I have decided to run." At first they stared at him as if not understanding, then one clapped and all the others joined in. He talked with them for over two hours, discussing various pertinent aspects, listening to their views. At first some Departmental Chiefs were inclined to suggest that this time it would not be so easy, but he overruled them by ridicule. By and by they became infected with his optimism, his obvious power. The conference ended on a strong note of mutual encouragement.

Mrs. Wesley brought in coffee, cookies and brandy. After half an hour of pleasant chatting they began to disperse.

The Chief Executive stood on the porch, slapping his associates on the back, shaking their hands powerfully, as they bade him good-night. He watched them go off in twos and threes, till the last one disappeared into the shadows. Night and day on board were distinguished by the dimness or brightness of the lights in the square.

He stood for a moment alone. Then he turned and went indoors. "Muriel, I'm going upstairs to the study to work a bit. Tell Mark to come and see me when he comes in, however late it is." He kissed her on the cheek.

He climbed up to the chart room and closed the door behind him. He went to the porthole and

watched the stars. It was good to be active once more. If they thought there was going to be opposition, so much the better. It was exhilarating to be aggressive again, to fight, to have something beyond the routine, unvarying administrative job.

He turned and sat down at his desk, setting to work on the elaborate directives for his campaign manager.

THE Commander glanced up at the chronometer when he heard a knock on the door. It was already past two o'clock in the morning. "Come in." It was Mark.

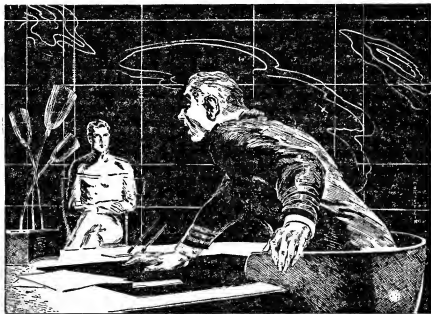
"Ah, come in, Mark. Glad you interrupted me." He looked down at the sheaf of papers filled with his handwriting. "Might have gone on all night. Guess there's no point in exhausting all the possibilities at one sitting. Think I'll turn in. Plenty to do tomorrow." He rose, going to a cupboard. "How about a little nightcap before we retire? How's that sound?"

"Fine."

He looked at Mark. The boy seemed pale, his reply had been hesitant, thin-voiced. "What's the matter, son, not feeling all right?"

"Oh, I'm O.K., thanks, Dad." Mark sat down. He took the whisky his father offered him and put the glass to his lips. He took a good swallow.

Commander Wesley sat down and settled back in his chair, his drink in his hand.



"Anything to report?" he asked his son. "I mean, about this new party?" He said it a little depreciatingly, with a smile. Still full of his campaign plans, fortified by his conference, he could afford to be amused by what he now realized were childish games.

"Yes, I have."

"Well?"

But Mark did not reply at first. Not till his father repeated, "Well, Mark, what's it called, this new party?"

Mark looked up. His lips were trembling a little.

"It's called the Back to Earth Party."

The Commander rose. For a

moment he was speechless. Then he roared out, "What did you say?"

"The Back to Earth Party."

The Commander looked at him incredulously and then laughed—a short, gasping sound. "Really, Mark, that's no joking matter."

Mark did not move, except to place the glass to his lips and drain it.

The Commander was now frowning. "You shouldn't say that even in fun," he rebuked his son gently.

"But it's true, Dad. They're very serious about it." If anything Mark was paler. "To them it's not a laughing matter." He looked keenly at his father. "Back to Earth. They say better now when it'll only take

ten years. Every minute forward means two minutes back."

The Commander's good humor had vanished. He was irritated. "You sound like a slogan."

"It's intended as a campaign slogan. Every minute forward means two minutes back," Mark repeated stubbornly.

The Commander seemed not to grasp it. He leaned forward toward his son. "But surely they're not serious about this? They can't be. You must have misunderstood. It's supposed to be a joke. A bad one, I grant you, but a joke all the same."

Mark looked at him with rigid face. "Dad, they're deadly serious about it."

The Commander got up, began restlessly pacing the small room. Mark had evidently got hold of the wrong end of the stick; it couldn't possibly be meant seriously. But even in jest—some student's bright idea of a prank—it was dangerous. They were playing with fire. He'd have to frighten them; put a stop to their irresponsible nonsense right away. "Very well, if they choose to take it seriously, so shall I. But I'll make them pay for the consequences of their foolishness." He shook a warning finger at his son. "And it won't do them any good to hide behind their mothers' skirts. Serious!" He snorted and brushed back his grey hair, strode to the port-hole, looked out, turned, marched to the window overlooking the

square. "It's bad business even in fun." He swung on his heels. "This could turn out to be a grave blow to public morale." He began striding about the room again. "Sure it's serious. Damn serious. Our volunteering, our pledges and solemn promises—those are serious things, not subjects for jokes."

"I tell you it's not *meant* as a joke, Dad. The young people say they didn't volunteer; they made no promises."

The Commander stopped in his pacing. Was it conceivable that this really was no joke, that it was in earnest, as Mark said. He considered his son. Mark was not given to idle levity. And why the pale, drawn face? "But Mark," he said softly, "they know very well we made those promises binding on ourselves and our children."

Two spots of crimson now flushed his son's cheeks. "The young people feel unbound by such promises, Dad. It wasn't they who volunteered."

As his father stared at him blankly, Mark continued. "Take me, for instance. I was only eleven. You mustn't forget that, Dad. I was eager to go, of course. But I didn't really know what it was all about. We promised nothing, remember that. We didn't volunteer. And if conceivably your pledges embraced those of us who were alive at the time, what right had you to condemn unborn generations to this steel tube?" He gestured hatefully round the room, encompass-

ing their tight little world. "They'll be men too; and isn't Man's birth-right to live and die on Earth?"

The color had drained out of the Commander's face. "You mean," he asked falteringly, "you think like that too? You—my son? Son of the leader of the expedition?"

Mark looked away. "Yes, Dad." His reply had been a whisper.

"Mark!" A great, painful cry; as if he had received a physical blow. He sprang at the young man, stooped down to take him by the shoulders, shaking him. "Mark, for God's sake wake up. Do you realize what you're saying? A whole generation of effort went into the construction of this ship. It's the pride of our industry, the pinnacle of our technical achievement. It carries with it the hopes and dreams of hundreds of millions. Good God, that's the whole point of our existence, to go forward, forward." He let go of Mark and stood away, dilated eyes fixed on his son. "Mark, don't ever breathe to anyone that you considered betraying a whole generation even for a moment."

Mark sprang to his feet. "But they're willing to sacrifice five, six of ours," he shot out bitterly. "Perhaps uselessly. Do we really know what X15 is like? Oh, yes, the astronomers told us it's just like Earth. But what they see is light a hundred years old. Perhaps it's no longer there—exploded, disintegrated." He went on excitedly. "I'm a man now, Dad. We're all

men now. About five hundred of us have grown to maturity on this ship—we're men and women now." His voice was rising, his face distorted with passion. "And we don't want to live our whole lives like rats in a steel trap. Well fed and secure—oh sure—but rats all the same. Ten years of our lives 'already gone! We can stand another ten because we'd have to, but by God not a moment longer." He stopped; his face became calm. In a sudden access of tenderness he came close to his father, placing his arm round the older man's shoulder. "Don't you understand, Dad, we just want to get back to Earth."

The Commander shook him off. "It's too easy to say that. Too easy." His voice was trembling. "I never expected to hear that from my flesh and blood." He put his hands to his head, began moving about the room again with great strides, gesturing wildly. "For those on Earth we're already heroes. Enshrined in the national memorial—glorious ancestors to a whole new globe—an unimaginable future." He turned accusingly. "What would you've said if our forefathers who emigrated to America had spoken as you?" he demanded bitterly. "Didn't fathers have the right to commit their children—and their unborn issue? And didn't we make a great country out of it and a powerful civilization? Aren't you proud—you, yes you, the descendant—to be American? There's your

justification!"

Mark shook his head. "It's not comparable. It took a month, two months to get to America—say even six. But not a lifetime, let alone five or six generations. And they were free to go back if the spirit moved them." When his father merely looked at him aghast, he added, "I mean, Dad, that you had no right to commit us. Yourself, yes, but not us. No moral right."

The Commander leapt forward and banged the table. "We had the moral right, by God, and we have the power to do so." He leaned forward, his blazing eyes narrowing. His mind was made up. "I'll arrest you all. I'll put a stop to this disease before it spreads any further."

Mark faced him defiantly. "I think you'll find that impossible," he said quietly. "There're too many of us in the movement. You can't arrest us all."

"We'll see about that." The Commander sat down, swung to his communications instrument, flicked on the switch, barked, "Get me the Chief of Internal Security."

There was a moment of silence. "You might as well turn it off, Dad. It's too late."

Slowly the Commander turned around. "What in the devil do you mean?"

"My mission tonight," said Mark, "is to arrest you." There was a break in his voice. "Sorry, Dad, but that's the way it has to be. I may

as well tell you formally that you're under arrest."

The Chief executive smiled. "Why you cocky young pup. I've a good mind to whip you."

"At this very moment," Mark continued, stepping back, speaking hurriedly, "all the Chiefs of your Departments are under restraint. The Back to Earth Party is in possession by now," he glanced at his watch, "of every key department and installation: the tritium motors, the internal security apparatus, the communications system, transportation, the armory . . . in short, everything."

"I don't believe you. You wouldn't dare."

Mark turned and opened the door. The landing outside the study was full of young men. In stupefied silence the Commander watched as young Jimmy Wallender came forward, saluted him respectfully and then turned to Mark. "Everything went according to plan, Mark. You just have to say the word."

The Commander breathed in a great gasp of air through distended nostrils. Mark the leader! His son traitor-in-chief! Again that feeling of bewilderment, of chaos, of abruptly being out of his depth, of pushing back the dark thoughts, the self-forbidden thoughts. Dimly he heard his son speaking—a voice far away.

"Dad, I want to assure you that there'll be no violence. Everything will go on as before. Everything,"

his son's laugh, "except the direction of flight." A pause. "O.K., Jimmy, prepare for assembly."

EVENTS crowded fast upon the Commander within the next few hours. He was under arrest only nominally. Every respect was paid to him, but even so Charley Hughes and Tom Simpson never left him, both hanging onto his every movement, sitting just behind him or standing close. Several times he contemplated fleeing, a sudden turn, a smashing of his huge fists, a lunge and then escape—but to where?

At first there had been confused refusal of belief, a clutching at impossible explanations. Then a slowly mounting anger overcame him at the depth of the perfidy. A frustrated madness began to tear at his vitals, alternating with sick, stupendous grief, a sense of inestimable loss.

Now he sat in silence in his living room, calm on the surface, a storm of conflicting emotions within.

Mark and the other leaders were issuing orders and receiving information from all parts of the astral ship. They worked efficiently, with the minimum of fuss.

At five in the morning—two hours earlier than usual—the great lights in the square were turned on full blast.

Mark motioned to his father, inviting him outside onto the porch. The square was already filling with

people. The ramps and escalators were thick with humanity pouring down into the open space, hurrying toward the foot of the steps on which they stood. Save for those operating indispensable services or guarding key positions, all the inhabitants—men, women and children—were soon expectantly gathered in front of them.

Mark stepped forward and gripped the microphone. "Citizens of our astral ship. We have this night executed a coup. The Government is in our power. But we do not mean to abuse that power. Our aims must be endorsed by you. Otherwise we shall step down. I believe they will be endorsed by you. I shall explain our intentions. . . ."

The Commander looked at the sea of silent, serious faces as Mark's voice droned on. They would lynch Mark and the youths about him when they realized the great betrayal of all their ideals. He drew himself up, a grim smile pushing down the corners of his mouth.

Then, before he was aware of it, a great, confused roar went up from nearly five thousand throats. The school children cheered, threw their hats in the air; men and women embraced, tears running down their faces. Spontaneous dancing broke out in two sections of the great crowd. Pandemonium. A wild, sudden release. A frenzy; a joy long pent up. "Back to Earth. Back to Earth."

Mark's flushed and triumphant face turned to him. He felt someone touch his hand and glanced down. Muriel placed her arm in his, squeezing it. "We'll be back in ten years, Jonas." There were tears in her eyes. "Jonas—Vermont again." She too?

Mark cried for silence. The square gradually hushed. "And now I shall issue the order of the day." He paused and then exultantly shouted at the top of his voice, so that it could be heard to the outermost parts of the square: "DIRECTION EARTH. FULL SPEED AHEAD."

The Commander, a wild look on his face, pushed forward past Mark and seized the microphone. "Fellow citizens, for God's sake. . . ." Half a dozen youths flung themselves on him, pinioning his arms, overcoming him, hustling him indoors.

Through the waves upon waves of cheering that came to him inside, a new powerful sound became progressively more audible, a sound and a trembling of the great steel frame that the Commander had not heard or felt for ten years. The roar of the tritium engines increased, the ship vibrated as the astronavigators began the wide semicircle that was to reverse the direction of flight.

When, after two hours, the maneuver was accomplished, the motors suddenly stilled. The ship was again silently, swiftly hurtling

through space.

THAT night the Commander sat in his living room. The three of them were alone—he, his wife, his son. He had been put on his honor not to attempt a reversal of a situation unanimously endorsed.

The Commander glanced up. Nothing had changed. He was in the bosom of his family, in the White House, as usual.

But no, three things had changed that would forever make him an alien presence in their midst—in this house as in all the other houses that tier upon tier clung like honeycombs to the inside of the shell of the astral ship. First the boys and girls had become men and women. But strangers to him, with other modes of thought and feeling, crying out and claiming a birthright which they said he wished to deny them, asserting it with violence. Second they were flying at ninety thousand miles per second back toward their native Earth, away from the planet which had once been the focus of their dreams. Third, there had sprung up a hope—which he now realized was unquenchable—a hope that they were once more to live a life outside this thing of steel and glass whose constricted space they had grown to loathe and fear.

Muriel was smiling at him tenderly. So was Mark.

He sighed. Suddenly a memory came to him. It was of his native

village in Vermont. A memory and at the same time a promise, for he saw himself as an old man walking in the snow through the main street, buttoning up his scarlet coat, fixing his scarf and pulling down his cap against the cold, greeting Ed Hersey, the Mayor, as he passed crunchingly by, stopping at Mr. Bean's, the grocer, to sample the latest maple sugar crop, whistling to his dog, smiling at the pleasant, familiar scene. A crisp, sunlit day.

He reached forward and placed a hand on his wife's arm, another on Mark's knee. There were tears in his eyes.

Muriel came to kneel in front of him. "Think, Jonas, think! Every minute brings us nearer home."

"You'll still be a young man, Dad." His son gave him a playful punch. "What's sixty-five? We Wesleys live to be ninety."

As Mark joined his mother before him, the Commander embraced them. But even as he did so he knew his vision of Vermont was false, futile.

He rose slowly. "I think I'll take a walk before turning in."

Muriel and Mark accompanied him to the porch.

He turned to wave to them, seeing them standing in the dusk, his son's arm round his mother's waist.

He passed the great square, his footsteps ringing on the steel. Slowly and deliberately he made his way toward the waste-disposal plant.

He at least would remain steadfast. He would be nearer to X15 than any other man; nearer than Jimmy Wallender. Together with that good friend he would henceforth share the black void. Their two bodies would perhaps warm the vast, universal cold.



JACK WILLIAMSON (*Concluded from page 2*)

dren who are usually very charming.

Though I remember the days when book publishers felt that science fiction was suicide, nearly a dozen of my novels are now in hard covers. One of them had a sequel. The book reviewer for the *New York Times* conceded that SEETEE SHIP was this and that, but he went on to say

that unfortunately the writing made it seem like a comic strip. The editors of the *New York Sunday News* read the review. It happened that they wanted a new science fiction comic strip. They looked up the book, and telephoned me. For the past year or so, I've been writing the script for BEYOND MARS—

All that stood between Venus and the conquering *Tetbanni* was a jungle trader and a snake. But Huber wasn't an ordinary trader, and under no circumstances could Hathor be classed as an ordinary snake.

BATTLE in the SKY

By Robert Moore Williams

Illustrated by J. Allen St. John

THE snake was at least twenty feet long. It had a round body that was as thick as a man's trunk and a mottled color that was a constantly shifting panorama of reds, greens, blues, and grays. It swam silently through the jungle pool and slipped from the water to the bank without making a sound. It went up the bank and came up behind the human, Huber, where it lifted itself until its head was five feet above the ground.

The human, Huber, a jungle trader, was sitting on a log. His heavy trading pack was resting beside him. He did not turn his head as the snake came up behind him. He continued puffing on his pipe. "Did you find anything?" he said, between puffs.

"Oh, blast it!" the snake said, abashed. "I was certain I had slipped up on you this time. Do you

have eyes in the back of your head? Or do you have sensory equipment that you have not revealed?"

"Humans do not possess the sense that you call *thuxion*," Huber answered. "No, I do not have eyes in the back of my head. I heard you."

"How could you have heard me? I did not make a sound?"

"I heard you by the sounds that stopped being made when you appeared. A *casnew* was chirping at the edge of the water. It stopped hastily when it saw you. A tree frog was croaking above my head. It also stopped. So I knew you were there, Hathor."

"So that's it," the snake said, relieved. "It wasn't anything I did wrong." The snake flowed across the log, stood there with round head uplifted, studying the jungle trail that ran in front of them.



J Allen Sr. John.

Bony carapaces opened in its front, revealing a pocket beneath. Two small tentacles appeared in the pocket. The tentacles took a pipe and a tobacco pouch from a hiding place. The snake looked at the tobacco. Huber caught the overtones of dissatisfaction in the thinking that was flowing from the creature.

"Wet? Have some of mine." Huber extended his pouch. "That's what happens when you *Convers* try to adopt human vices. They're not really suited to you, with the result that you can never keep your tobacco dry."

"There was condensation," the snake said, abashed and defensive. He took the pouch that Huber offered.

"Don't kid me. Your carapaces leak."

"They do not!" the snake said, hotly. Then he perceived what was happening. "Oh, darn, you're teasing me again, you're doing what you call pull my leg." He rose into the air, opened a fanged mouth, spat deep in his throat, and struck at Huber with fangs three inches long.

The human watched this spectacle with interest. He did not blink an eye or move a muscle. "Damn!" the snake said. "How did you know—"

"Humans learn how to run bluffs and how to see through them. Sometimes a bluff is all we have left to go on."

"Uh. Don't you know the mean-

ing of fear?"

"Would I be here if I did?"

"I guess that's right," the snake answered. "I guess you wouldn't be here. For that matter, I ought not to be here either." For an instant, alarm showed in the shifting colors that flowed through the body. Then the alarm subsided. The snake filled the pipe, lit it with a tiny glow lighter, and smoked silently on the log beside the human.

"Did you discover anything?" Huber asked.

"Not a thing." The snake smoked furiously, then timidly inquired. "Is that bad?"

"It's not good," Huber answered.

Again the snake smoked furiously. "Why don't you humans just go away and let us solve this problem ourselves?"

The trader scratched his head. He had a round, brown face, and thoughtful eyes. He was a young man, physically, but the eyes were old. They were the eyes of a man who had seen many things and was wondering what else there was to see. He started to speak.

"Don't answer that question," the snake said hastily. "Forget, I ever asked it."

"We *could* go away," Huber said. "At least, some of us could."

A wave of green passed over the snake's body. He twisted, squirmed, writhed. In his agitation, he got the bowl of the pipe in his mouth and spat out a flurry of smoke and profanity.

"No, no, NO! It is not wanted that you go away. It is wanted that you stay."

Huber watched the contortions with detached interest. "I told you about human vices. Now you've burned your mouth."

"It is nothing. There was talk about you humans going away. And taking away your ships out there!" The snake gestured toward the cloud mass overhead.

"You started it."

"Sometimes in my exasperation I let thoughts flow with my *thuxion* that I do not wish for you to know. My exasperation really lies with the nature and the extent of the problem, not with you humans. I very carelessly left myself open to the wishful thought that the departure of you humans might solve the problem. I apologize." Writhing and twisting, the snake poured the words into Huber's mind.

"All right," the human said.

"You will not go away?" the snake anxiously inquired.

The human flicked a piece of broken stick along the trail. "Off in that direction is a village full of humans. They won't go away. Because they don't want to, and because they can't. So we won't go away, because of them. No. If the menace is to be met, it must be met here."

"And make of our planet a battleground!" The snake spoke too quickly and again was abject with apologies.

"We are not making a battleground of your planet. But your planet may become a battleground. Our instruments have indicated that something is wrong here."

"Do you mean right here where we are?"

"Village 371 is just over the slope," Huber answered, nodding toward the jungle trail. "The wrongness is somewhere near that village. We're here to find out exactly where, Hathor."

"I'm going home," the snake answered vigorously. "I'm going back to the other side of the planet, where nobody ever even heard of a *Tethanni*—"

"Probably no one in this vicinity has ever heard of them either. But the fact that no one has heard of them doesn't make them any less real. And how safe will you be on the other side of your planet, if the *Tethanni* make a landing here?"

"That's so," the snake said, writhing.

"Did you pick up anything with you *thuxion* while you were scouting?"

"Nothing definite. But I got the impression that something was going on. It was the most intangible sensation, clear out on the fringe of my sensing."

"What?"

"I couldn't tell. The radiations were so weak I could not be certain I was really sensing them." The snake suddenly ceased all movement and stood like a dog

on a point.

"What is it?"

"A female from the village. She is coming to see you."

Huber's eyes went along the jungle path and up the slope. He could see no one, his ears detected nothing. "I don't see or hear anything," he said.

"I know. You humans are deficient in certain sensory equipment. But she will be along. I will go back into the swamp now, so she won't see me."

The snake put the pipe and the pouch away, closed his carapaces, and slid silently into the swamp. There was no ripple as the big body went into the water. Huber waited. Within five minutes he saw the girl.

The sight sent little prickles of uneasiness through him. Although he was very familiar with the ability of the *Conver* race to *thux-ion*, he never quite became completely accustomed to the use of the ability.

The girl was a young woman, brown-skinned, tall, lithe-limbed. At the sight of Huber, she came forward eagerly, a smile forming on her face.

"I heard there was a trader on the trail, but I couldn't wait."

Listening, Huber wondered why the tones of her voice reminded him of bells heard far off, the sounds of music in the summer dusk. There had been a time when he had dreamed of a woman like this.

He hastily turned such thinking out of his mind. Men following his calling did not dream of women. This girl was mildly attractive, sexually, that was all there was to it. She had a pleasant face and a glowing smile, she would probably make a good cook and an adequate mother, and—"He caught his thinking again as it tried to go in a circle. "This is neither the time nor the place for such thinking," he told himself.

The girl smiled, waiting for him to speak.

"Nor are you the man to be thinking such thoughts."

"What?" the girl said, astonished.

"I beg your pardon," Huber said, hastily. "I spoke aloud. It is a bad habit we traders fall into when we are much alone. Please forget it."

The girl smiled as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. He swore inwardly as he found himself blushing. With an effort of will, he forced the red color from his face. Again he was calm and detached, politely interested in her and in what she wanted.

"I do hope you have knives," she said. "I lost the last good kitchen knife last week. Mr. Ekkard doesn't have any, or none that are fit to carry home. I hope you have some. You don't realize how important so simple a tool is until you try to get along without one."

"Quite right," Huber answered. "Yes, I have knives." He was unfolding his pack, revealing the usual line of goods carried by the

men who ventured into the jungle to trade with the natives. "The blades are *tone* steel, guaranteed against rust or corrosion. Also, the metal is so tough that they rarely need resharpening."

"How wonderful. I never heard of such knives before." Music sounded in Huber's mind as she talked. He choked off such thinking. Suddenly she looked frightened.

"Yes," he said.

Her face was startled, her eyes wide. "Coming down here, I saw something."

"Yes."

"I didn't get a good look at it. It was in the jungle and I just caught a glimpse. It was about four feet tall and it was almost as wide as it was high. Did you ever hear of an animal that looked like this?"

His face was grave but no hint of the sudden pressure erupting inside of him got through to the surface. "No, can't say that I have. I've seen some queer creatures in these swamps, but nothing like the beast you describe. Are you sure you saw it?"

"I saw something."

"Perhaps a stump. Or the light falling on the trunk of a tree."

She seemed reassured, if a little doubtful, and she lingered, looking through all the things he had for sale. Huber learned that her name was Jean Carson and that she lived with her father, who was a retired spaceman. As she lingered, Huber found sweat was be-

ginning to form under his arms. He lit his pipe, clamping his teeth against the stem.

"Are you coming on to the village?" the girl asked.

"I plan to."

Her eyes went over him again, appraisingly, not boldly but with a kind of longing in them as if she sensed something in him that she wanted. "Perhaps I will see you then?"

"Perhaps," Huber answered. He watched her walk away. Under his arms, the sweat began to flow more freely. She had an easy swing to her walk and she managed to give the impression that she did not know he was watching her.

Huber thought: *It is one thing to consider the destruction of thousands of life-forms but it is very much another thing to watch one of them walk carelessly past sudden death.*

She went up the slope and out of sight. He breathed easier then. If there was only something he could do! But there wasn't, now!

"Yah, yah, yah!" a voice whispered in his mind, behind him.

He whirled. The snake was there.

"Hah! I sneaked up on you that time. You were standing there thinking about this female—Oh, I'm sorry, my friend." The snake's response changed swiftly as he caught an echo of the turmoil in John Huber's mind. "Oh! She saw one! Or talked about one! Or—"

"Right!" Huber answered.

"They're here."

Yellow color surged through the snake. A trembling appeared in the long body.

"Where are they?" Huber said. His voice was harsh. The emotional overtones back of it were harsher still.

"I'll try. I'll send out the *thux-ion*."

Mottled colors built on the yellow motif ran through Hathor's skin. He closed his eyes, twisted his head in different directions, like a dog testing the wind. Huber, sweating and watching, thought with envy of the perceptive equipment possessed by this creature. Apparently nothing was happening but Huber knew—precise experiments had proved this point again and again—that the Converter was actually feeling, sensing the life forms in the surrounding area.

The snake opened his eyes. "They are here!"

"Where?"

"I do not know. I catch only vague glimmerings, as before. There is a shield in operation, or they are hidden—somewhere."

"But where are they hidden? Hathor, we've got to know!"

"I cannot tell you. I cannot sense *where*. I—" Hathor broke off as sudden screams came from the direction of the village.

"I guess that's where," Hathor whispered.

Huber was already running along the trail. Swiftly, the snake followed him.

THE village was visible from the top of the slope, a straggle of wooden buildings wearily climbing the hill to the most impressive structure in the place, a big rambling building that set by itself on the highest tier of the rising ground. Beyond the village was a big valley, where cleared fields were visible in the jungle.

In the open place below the big house a figure was writhing on the ground. People were moving in that direction. Huber went running.

The figure on the ground was that of a boy of 14. His clothes had been burned from his body and he writhed in pain. Huber dropped to his knees beside the burned boy. Screams sounded, pulling his eyes upward. He saw the reason for the screaming. A woman had caught sight of Hathor and had become frightened.

"Stop that stupidity. You've all heard of the Converters, the intelligent snake creatures of this planet."

Huber spoke sharply. The words caught and held the crowd. Behind them, a fat man was waddling down the slope from the big house. His face was red with indignation. "I've heard of 'em too!" the fat man shouted. "I don't want any of 'em on my property. They're dangerous. Get away from here, snake!"

"I am not wanted here." Hathor's agitated thought came into Huber's mind.

"You stay here anyhow," Huber

answered.

"I ain't gonna have no snakes on my property!" the fat man repeated.

"Shut up!" Huber said. His voice had the lash of a whip in it. The fat man was silent but the eyes that he turned toward Huber were glazed with anger. The trader turned his attention back to the boy on the ground. The skin surface showed reddening.

"A *Tethanni* ion blast?" Hathor whispered in the human's mind.

"The burn looks like it, but if the blast had really hit, there wouldn't have been any boy left. So I don't know. The problem now is how to save his life." There were no hospital facilities here in this wilderness, probably there were no medicines beyond primitive salves and lotions. The youngster had to have help, fast.

"Is there anything I can do?" It was Jean Carson, on her knees beside Huber.

"Yes. Get my pack. It's on the ground where you saw me. Fast!"

She was gone like the wind, skirts held high, brown legs flashing in a flurry of motion.

"Can I help?" Hathor's voice whispered in Huber's mind.

"I have heard that the *thuxion* can be used to destroy as well as to sense."

"No, my friend, no." Hathor sighed, and was silent.

"I have also heard that it can be used to heal."

"To anyone else, in any other

circumstances, I would never admit this," Hathor said. His eyes came to focus on the youth twisting on the ground. "Yes."

"How do we use it?"

"I will let you use it," Hathor answered.

"Easy, lad. We're here to help." Huber caught the threshing hands. The group of humans made no move to help. They were held back by fear of Hathor, or by fear of something else. The youth relaxed. "What happened?" Huber said, looking up.

"He was trespassing on my property!" the fat man said, blowing out his cheeks. "That's what happened. I won't have no trespassin'—"

"If you open your mouth again, I'll feed you to the snake," Huber said.

Hathor reared, spitting. The fat man hastily backed away. Hathor came back to a position beside Huber. "Sometimes I wonder about you human beings."

"We're not all like that," Hathor answered.

Running like a deer, the girl was back. Panting, she laid the pack on the ground. Huber opened it. There were a dozen ampoules and a tiny gun to blow the charge through the skin. Huber selected an ampoule. The gun puffed softly. Within a minute the writhing of the youth had moderated.

"All that does is to keep him quiet and relaxed," Huber said. "The rest is up to you."

"All right," Hathor said. "Since he is a human and you are a human and you will understand what is inside of him, and what has to be done, the *thuxion* must flow through you."

"Let it flow," Huber said. He took a deep breath, waited. Earth scientists were still puzzled about the nature of the *thuxion*. Few humans knew that it existed, fewer still had ever had an opportunity to use it. Huber did not know what to expect. Very gently he felt a force come into his mind. It was like nothing he had ever experienced before, it was a kind of a blending between him and Hathor. Something that originated in Hathor came into the human and Huber and Hathor became one. "A force field flowing—" Huber found himself whispering.

"Go to the wounded boy now," Hathor whispered. "Just look at him."

Huber felt the force field begin to flow through him and into the boy. It passed through the burned skin. Huber felt flashes of pain as if he was feeling the burn of the boy. "Do not mind the pain," Hathor whispered. "It flows to us from him and as it flows, he gets better. The *thuxion* will go deeper now."

Huber felt the field expand. Pain flowed into him. Sweat began to appear on his body.

"What's happening to you?" the watching girl spoke quickly.

"Nothing. Be quiet."

The pain built up. It was coming in red flashes now. Huber could not tell what was happening inside the boy. The youth cried out, and writhed. Pain surged in a bolt of lightning through Huber. Then the pain was going, going.

"It's done," Hathor whispered. "He will live."

Huber felt the *thuxion* flow out of him. He saw that Hathor was trembling and he knew that he was covered with sweat and was badly shaken.

"Why don't you do something to help that kid?" the fat man demanded.

Huber said nothing.

"What did you do, you and the Conyer?" the girl whispered.

"I gave him a shot."

"And what else?"

"Nothing."

A woman came running through the crowd—the boy's mother.

"Your son will be all right," Huber said to her. He glanced at the girl. "Is there a place here where we can spend the night?"

"Certainly. At my house."

Huber and Hathor followed her down the slope. Behind them, the fat man made threatening gestures with his fists and told the bystanders what he would do if "that damned snake didn't stay off his property." He didn't speak loud enough for Huber to hear him, however.

IN THE Solar System, vast forces were poised like light-

ning ready to strike. In Luna City, the military base of the Inner Planets, ships and fighting men were prepared to go into action at a moment's notice. On Mars, where the red-colored fighting races lived, the same was true. The Inner Planets were knit together in a tight cordon, seeking peace if they could get it but ready for war if it came. The much more primitive peoples of Venus were not prepared for organized fighting—this planet had not yet advanced to a stage where organization was possible.

Because Venus was primitive, a new world, unorganized, hanging in space like a peach ripe for the plucking, the military minds of the Inner Planets, headed by General Ramsey, suspected they knew where the coming lightning would strike next.

They were taking all possible precautions to meet and ward off the blow.

Well above the atmosphere of Venus, four great ships circled the Veiled Planet, coasting in orbit there. These ships were very unusual in construction. They were actually sky-going generators, tremendous power plants. Power in vast quantities was needed to work the transit. These ships supplied part of the power.

They were also mobile relay points through which the transit could be funnelled, through which men and machines could flow from where they were to where they

were needed.

On Earth, on Luna, and on Mars, the transit transmitters were located, buildings big enough to hold a division and all its equipment. Men and machines, flame-throwing tanks that could wallow through the depths of a swamp, swim a river, or tear their way through the thickest jungle, entered one end of these vast structures. They could enter in a steady stream. But nothing would ever come out the other end of the building.

This was the transit.

It was a new idea, to humans. They had learned about it, to their sorrow, from creatures called *Tet-hanni*. Learning that it existed, an army of scientists had been mobilized to discover how it worked and how it could be built. The scientists had been successful in their efforts. The results of their labor were visible on Earth, on Luna, on Mars, and on four ships circling Venus.

But neither the scientists nor the military specialists could determine for sure where the lightning was going to strike—next.

Until they knew, the vast complex of men and machines involved in the transit were without a target.

"THIS is John Huber. He's a jungle trader," the girl said.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Huber." The elder Carson was gnarled and twisted like a tree that has withstood many storms, or like an old

spaceman who had spent his life jockeying hot ships across space and has retired now to a life in the wilderness far from civilization, knowing that the rigors of life in the jungle can never be as great as those of space. His handshake was firm and friendly.

"Mr. Huber wants to spend the night with us."

"Mighty glad to have your company."

"And this is Hathor of the *Convers*."

For the sake of politeness, Carson had been trying to pretend he had not even noticed the twenty-foot long snake that had followed his daughter into his house. At the introduction, Hathor opened his carapaces and extended a tentacle. It cost the old spaceman an effort to shake hands with a tentacle but he was equal to the task. "Glad to meet you, Hathor. I've heard of you *Convers* but I never met one of you. I thought the species had died out on Venus."

"We're not extinct, yet," Hathor answered. He took out his pipe. Borrowing tobacco from Huber, he lit the pipe. The old spaceman stared at him from bugged-out eyes. "A living, breathing, twenty-foot long snake a-smoking a pipe right in my house!" he said.

"You'll get used to Hathor," Huber spoke. "His appearance may be a little unusual but his heart is in the right place."

Carson showed great interest in Hathor. The *Conver* was kept busy

answering questions. He complained, telepathically, to Huber about this.

"You're doing fine," Huber told him. "You're a natural born liar anyhow. Lying to an old spaceman ought not to strain your abilities."

"If I have any talent in that direction, I learned it from you humans," Hathor answered. "John, what are we doing here? There are *Tethanni* around this vicinity."

"Can you tell me *where*?"

"No. I told you before. They are either hidden or they are using shields, or both. But they are somewhere close at hand."

"That's not enough. I've got to know where. Keep trying to locate them."

Outside, the quick Venusian dusk was falling. In the kitchen, amid a great clatter of pots and pans, the girl announced that food was ready. The two men ate heartily but Hathor, because his diet was different, refused food. Carson was concerned. "Are you sure you won't have one of these iguana steaks? They're mighty fine. I shot the iguana myself this morning, in the jungle."

"I'm sure they're good. Thank you very much. However, I do not eat flesh," Hathor answered. To Huber he said. "You human cannibals! If I ate that iguana steak, I'd feel like I was eating my own cousin." An expression of strong disgust came along with the thought impression.

"I didn't know you were a cousin

to a lizard," Huber said.

"Oh, shut up. John, there are men outside."

"So what? Men live in this village."

"But these men—John, something is wrong." A knock sounded on the door as he spoke. Huber's hand went into his pocket. A small-sized but very powerful automatic pistol was hidden there, a weapon that threw an explosive slug. Carson, excusing himself, went to the door. Voices rumbled outside. Carson went out, closed the door behind him. The voices continued to rumble from the porch.

"We had better get out of here," Hathor whispered.

"They're human, they won't harm us," Huber answered. Across the table, Jean Carson showed signs of alarm. Carson came back into the room. Three armed men followed him. Each had a drawn pistol in his hand and a star glittered on the shirt of the first one.

"The Judgment Committee wants Mr. Hathor," Carson said, gulping. They sent the sheriff for him. He—he's—"

"Under arrest," the man with the star said.

"What is this?" Hathor wailed.

"Nothing of any importance," Huber answered. In split seconds, he considered the situation.

In these small, remote Venusian villages there was no law and little pretence at any. The organization of the Solar System, with its codes of rules and regulations and its

courts, was very far away. These villages operated as independent governmental units, each with its own system of law and its own means of enforcing it. In any village, a Judgment Committee would likely be an important group, probably a trial court and a court of last resort combined into one body.

"What do they want?" Huber asked.

"We want the snake," the sheriff answered. "What he is wanted for is for the Judgment Committee to say. He will have to come with us." The sheriff held the pistol ready for instant action.

"John, John, save me. Don't let these awful humans get me. They'll eat me."

"No, they won't."

"They eat iguanas—"

"Please!" Huber rose to his feet. "Of course we will come with you," he said to the sheriff.

"You just better had," the sheriff answered.

THE hall was stuffy and poorly lit. People twisted restlessly on the benches as they entered. Hathor and Huber were taken to the front of the room. The Judgment Committee was composed of three men. Stone-faced, they sat behind a long table. The fat man, his face still red and bristling with indignation, sat at the end of the table. Glancing at him, Huber had the impression that he might not belong on the committee but that he

actually ran it.

"John Huber and one Conver called Hathor?"

"Yes," Huber answered.

"Mr. Ekkard has complained against the Conver, and has filed charges, and will bear witness."

The fat man rose to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at Hathor.

"That snake did it!"

"Did what, Mr. Ekkard?" Huber asked.

"He burned that boy that got hurt on my property. Them snakes can do things like that. This snake burned that boy."

The sound of indrawn breathing ran through the room, then there was quick silence. Huber could feel anger beginning to surge through the listening people. Hathor's questions clamored in his mind. He ignored them, feeling for the situation that he sensed developing here. The Judgment Committee looked grim.

Ekkard was breathing righteous indignation. The flush of coming triumph had overcome the color of anger on his face.

"That's not true," Huber said.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Ekkard shouted.

"Exactly."

The color changed on Ekkard's face but Huber still sensed triumph about the man. Ekkard seemed to know he was going to win a victory here. What was the victory? Ekkard turned to the Judgment Committee.

"Are you going to take the word of a jungle trader, only a cut above a tramp, if he ain't actually a tramp, above the word of one of your foremost citizens, a man you've all done business with for years?"

The committee stirred. "But some evidence is necessary, Mr. Ekkard," one member protested apologetically.

"All right, I'll give you some evidence, if that's what you want. I saw the snake do it."

Again the hiss of indrawn breath ran through the room. It was much stronger this time. The anger vibrations were also stronger.

"Will you destroy this fat beast?" Hathor asked.

"No."

"But he is lying—"

"Something is behind his lies. Be quiet," Huber turned to the committee. "I am very sorry this has happened. Hathor throws himself upon the mercy of the court."

"Are you deliberately feeding me to these damned humans?" Hathor wailed.

"Be calm," Huber answered.

The Judgment Committee, even Ekkard, seemed at a loss. Ekkard seemed to have a moment of great doubt as though he was left groping by this withdrawal of opposition. "Do you admit that the snake is guilty, like I said?"

"Guilty," Huber answered.

"Then I demand the death penalty. We can't have such menaces to life and property running loose

around here. Why, he could have burned down my house, or my store, as easily as he burned that boy, if he had wanted to."

"Uh?" Huber said. He had not anticipated this.

"The death penalty is decreed," the foreman of the committee said. "The Conver, Hathor, shall be locked up and held until sunrise, at which time he shall be taken from his cell and shot dead."

Ekkard showed triumph. He had won his victory. Anger surged from the listeners in the room.

"John, what have you done to me?" Hathor demanded.

"I'll help you. They'll never execute you."

"And we also decree that the jungle trader, John Huber, be locked up and held under guard until after the execution, after which he shall be given twenty lashes and driven from the town."

Huber was silent. "I'll take that gun, or whatever it is that you've got in your pocket," the sheriff said behind him.

THEY were locked together in a single cell. Made of stone, it had no windows or openings except the iron grille of the door. Beyond, the door, in a narrow hallway, two humans were on guard. They were armed with rifles, primitive but deadly weapons. Revealing the faces of the guards, two lanterns lighted the hall.

"They're human, they won't harm us," Hathor said.

Huber was silent. The faces of the guards were brutish, ignorant, and they looked like law-breakers who had fled from Earth and had found refuge here in this primitive village.

"Typical humans! Fair examples of the whole bloodthirsty race. Why did I ever let myself in for such treatment?" Hathor continued.

"Be calm."

"You can say that. You are not the one who is getting killed in the morning."

"I shall consider myself very lucky to be alive when morning comes."

"Eh? Is there something you are not telling me?"

"You're forgetting something."

"The *Tethanni*?"

"What else?"

Hathor shuddered. "John, we've got to get out of here. Why did you confess that I burned that boy?"

"I was trying to keep both of us alive until morning."

"Eh? What? *Until*?"

"Yes. After the boy was burned, I thought we would be very lucky to be alive in the morning. The *Tethanni* are very close, Hathor. I confessed that you had burned the boy so they would lock you up. If you were locked up, you would not be a source of danger to anybody, *Tethanni* or human. Thus you would be out of the way, you would be safe."

"I see. That makes things dif-

ferent."

"I hope so. But I miscalculated and got both of us locked up. However, that is not too bad. With both of us locked up and presumably out of the way, whatever dirty business is afoot here will continue. Thus we may get a chance to find out about it."

"I see. Sometimes I admire the almost fiendish ingenuity of you humans. You think so fast and you consider so many different possibilities that you are baffling. No Conver would ever have thought as you have thought in this situation, with the result—"

"That there are not many Convers left alive on Venus and there will be fewer still unless humans help you along. You have your powers and your abilities but when it comes to—"

"Sensing intrigue and sudden death, a human is needed. All right. We're here. Safe until morning. Now what?"

"We aren't going to stay here until morning," Huber said, unruffled. While everybody thinks we are here, we are going to get out—and do some investigating."

"Very interesting. I seem to see two ruffians with weapons sitting on a bench—"

"So do I."

"And these walls are stone and that door is iron—"

"I agree. And those two men are human. Lend me the *thuxion*."

"Oh!" Hathor gasped. "I see!"

Again Huber felt the inexpli-

cable blending effect between him and Hathor, again he felt the force field flow into him. Sometime, if he lived long enough, he wanted to take Hathor back to Earth, for a full investigation of his incredible powers, but for the time being, he had other problems.

So far as any observer could see, nothing was happening, just as nothing had happened when the burned boy had been helped. But one of the guards on the bench began to nod. His head dropped an inch toward his chest, then another inch. Then he was snoring. Then the second guard began to nod. His head dropped to his chest.

"I greatly admire your ability to use the *thuxion*," Hathor whispered. "I cannot do this myself."

"Shhhh."

One of the guards got clumsily to his feet. Unlocking the door, he stood aside. Huber and Hathor went quickly out. The guard relocked the door and went back to his position on the bench, all without opening his eyes.

Huber and Hathor went out the back door.

Outside was the night, dark and incomprehensible. On Venus, the nights were darker than anywhere else in the Solar System. The cloud blanket overhead cut off the star light, resulting in a blackness so intense you could almost feel it with your fingers.

In the distance, lightning walked across the sky, a harbinger of one

of the violent Venusian storms.

"Now where do we go?" Hathor said.

Huber stood without moving. In the lightning flash, he had caught a glimpse of two humans pressing themselves against the wall of the building.

"Huber?" a questioning voice whispered. It was Carson, the old spaceman, and Jean.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

"We came to help you get out. I was going through the back door and give those two guards a look at my iguana gun."

"I see."

Jean Carson's whisper was sharp and hard. "You're not just an ordinary jungle trader. Who are you?"

"I want to talk to both of you," Huber answered. "Do you know a place where we can talk in safety?"

"The basement of my house," Carson answered. "I'll show you."

As they went down the steps, Huber caught a startled flick of Hathor's thinking. It went into silence before he could catch the gist of it. Below him, Carson opened the door. Huber followed him and Jean through it. The spaceman struck a match to an oil light. Huber turned to see what had disturbed Hathor.

Something stood in the doorway. Something had come down the steps behind him. It was not Hathor. The Conver was not in sight.

The creature that stood in the doorway behind them was short and squat. It was not more than four feet tall but it was almost as wide as it was high. A round, over-large face was placed squarely on two broad shoulders. Eyes alive with intelligence—and animosity—looked out of the head. The creature carried a tank suspended on its back. From the tank, a plastic hose fed gases to the mouth.

Hands at the ends of long arms carelessly gripped a short-barrelled weapon that seemed to be made of plastic and sun glass—the *Tet-hanni* ion blast!

Outside in the night, Hathor gasped, "He seemed to come out of nowhere, John. I didn't sense him until he was following you down the steps."

"W—what the devil?" Carson said huskily.

Jean uttered a tiny squeak.

Huber took a deep breath. Cold seemed to flow in upon him from outer space and flood through every cell of his body. Few humans had ever seen a creature like this. Huber had seen one specimen, a corpse in the dissecting rooms of Luna Base, where exasperated and frightened surgeons were trying to understand the functions of an organism that utterly bewildered them.

The jungle trader let the breath seep out of his lungs. "Come on in," he said. "We were expecting you."

In that quick sentence, spoken

on the spur of the moment, Huber knew he was betting his life. He was trapped. But if he could make the *Tethanni* a little uncertain the creature might permit him to remain alive long enough to resolve that uncertainty.

This presumed that the *Tethanni* understood enough English to know what Huber had said, a doubtful assumption in the first place.

A flicker of startled concern showed in the eyes of the creature. It delicately balanced the ion blast weapon. Inside the thick skull an even more delicate balancing operation was taking place on the mental level.

Holding his breath, Huber waited. The creature's lips moved. Grunting sounds came out.

"*Wayshingfurme?*" The grunts had some resemblance to English.

"Yes," Huber said firmly. "We have been trying to establish contact with you. The government of the Inner Planets wants to talk peace. What kept you so long?"

"*Peece?*" The creature did not seem to understand the meaning of the word.

"Yes. Take me to your commander-in-chief immediately, to talk peace!"

Again the creature delicately balanced the ion blast. There was not a sound in the basement. Outside in the night, Hathor was making frantic ESP signals. Huber was too engrossed to heed them. The *Tethanni* seemed confused both

by the attitude of the humans and the possible meanings of the word peace. What if "peace" was the name of a new weapon? The creature twisted in sudden discomfort.

"*Ishvill tekyou to Nevvi, great leader.*"

With the ion blast covering them from behind, they went ahead of the *Tethanni*, up the steps, and into the night.

"I'm going to hit him with the *thuxion*," Hathor whispered, in the darkness.

Huber spun on his heel, drove his fist with all his strength at the *Tethanni* midzone.

A SECOND before Huber spun, Hathor released the *thuxion*.

The effect on the *Tethanni* was that of momentary paralysis. Something came out of nowhere and hit him, stunned him, he did not know what it was or how to resist it. It seemed to be a blast of mental force, of some kind. Before he learned how to resist it, or if it could be resisted, something very physical hit him—Huber's fist. All the strength the human possessed was right behind that fist.

The *Tethanni* doubled over, dropping the gun. As lightning walked across the sky, Huber had a glimpse of Carson scrambling for the weapon. The old spaceman was not going to avoid a fight! Huber struck again, with all his strength. The *Tethanni* did not begin to understand this rain of blows, it was not his way of fight-

ing. Squealing, he thrust Huber from him, turned and fled. The pound of his feet came back.

"I cannot reach him now with the *thuxion*," Hathor whispered. "He is so swamped in fear that my energies cannot penetrate him."

Lightning revealed Carson holding the ion blast. "It's broken. He stepped on it."

"John, he was lying in wait and I did not sense him until he was between us," Hathor tried to explain.

"What the devil is going on here?" Carson demanded.

"I want my pack," Huber answered. "I left it upstairs."

"It's still there," Jean spoke. "I'll get it."

"Bring it into the basement, fast."

"But—" Carson protested.

"Come along and listen. You'll find out what's going on," Huber said.

The girl came tumbling down the basement steps with the pack. Huber snatched it from her. From it, he began to take pieces of equipment. As he joined them together, they grew into an instrument.

"That's a microwave radio transmitter," Carson said, wonder in his voice.

Huber was already speaking into the tiny transmitter. "Jungle Trader John Huber, X-304, calling Relay Ship Number One. Jungle Trader John—"

"Come in, Huber," the tiny

speaker answered.

"Put me through to the CIC. At once. This call has top priority, it takes precedence over all other communications. Put me through to the CIC."

"One moment," the startled operator answered. "What was that number again?"

"X-304 and now it's plus one."

"Okay, Huber, here you go through." Relays clicked gently. "Main Base," a distant voice whispered. Then another voice was coming across space, a strong, hearty voice but with overtones of concern in it. "General Ramsey speaking."

"John Huber, sir. Colonel, Intelligence, Sky Marines—"

"John, how are you?" Ramsey answered. Real pleasure sounded in his voice as if he was greeting an old friend.

"Alive, sir. I have data."

"Shoot."

"I wish to report as confirmed the presence of *Tethanni* in Venusian Village 371, space map survey of 2250."

"How many *Tethanni*?"

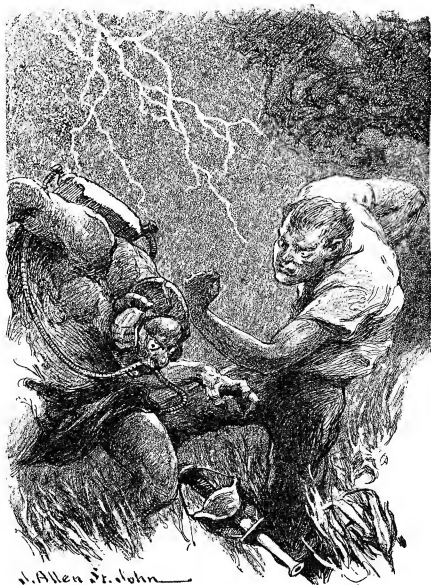
"I've seen one with my own eyes. No estimate as to number."

"How many humans in Village 371?"

Huber flicked a question up at Carson, Jean answered it. "About 500."

"Damn!" the CIC said. "Can they be evacuated?"

"Doubtful. Also an attempt to evacuate them would automati-





cally reveal to the *Tethanni* that we are aware of their presence here."

"Hell, so it would. You're on the ground. What action do you recommend?"

"Put down one relay ship, immediately, not at Village 371, but within ten Earth miles of it. In the meantime, I will try to discover if they have as yet established a relay station here, and if so, where it is located."

"It is of the utmost importance that we know if it is established and where it is located!" General Ramsey said emphatically.

"I know that, sir. I'll do my best."

"Good. I don't dare send help directly to you. You're on your own. I'll authorize and back to the limit any action you choose to take."

"Thank you, sir," Huber answered. This was a delegation of tremendous power and authority.

"Carry on."

"Yes, sir."

There was a split second of silence, then the voice of the CIC came again, saying, "Good luck, John." A choked quality was in the voice. Then the speaker was

silent.

Huber turned to Carson. "Does that answer your question as to who I am?"

Awe was in the old spaceman's eyes. "It more than answers it. But these things you called *Tethanni*—"

"You saw one of them, you know what they are. Their existence has been pretty much of an official secret. In fact, we didn't even know they existed in the Solar System until a couple of years ago, when they made a grab for Deimos, one of the moons of Mars. We fought a hell of a bitter little war there, for about three months, until we blasted them off the moon. Since then, we've been watching for their next grab."

Huber paused for breath. "They're natives of Saturn. Although the enormous gravity has prevented us from landing ships on Saturn, we are certain the *Tethanni* come from that planet. They are far advanced scientifically, though their space ships are crude, but when they hit Deimos, they had something that was far ahead of anything we had at that time—they had the transit."

"What's that? I never heard of it."

"Darned few people have heard of it. As yet, it's still as much a secret as we can keep it. When they discovered the transit, from the wreckage on Deimos, the military prodded the scientists to find out how it worked. They cracked

the secret about a year ago. Thus we have had a year to get ready. As to what it is, you will probably find out before sundown tomorrow."

"Can't you bomb their home planet?"

"Bomb a world the size of Saturn? That would be like throwing rocks into the ocean. That's not a feasible solution. The best we can do is to catch them before they establish a strong bridgehead on the Inner Planets and blast 'em back to Saturn."

Huber's voice was rough. It grew rougher still. "That means we have to keep watch over tremendous stretches of Mars, Venus, and Earth, not to mention the moons. If they manage to slip one small space ship through our guard, and establish a relay station for their transit, and slip through warriors and supplies, we may have a desperate war on our hands. The trick is, and it's no easy trick, to catch them before they get a transit relay station in operation. That's why Hathor and I are here, to locate that relay station that either is or soon will be in operation in this vicinity." His voice went into silence. Outside, thunder rolled and rain beat against the house.

"Do—do you think their relay station is in our town?" Carson asked.

"I don't know where it is, or if it is. The *Tethanni* we saw may have come from a small space ship hidden in the jungle. I want you

to gather ten to twenty trustworthy men, and bring them here immediately. I want them to assist me and Hathor in locating this relay station, if it is here. I also want them to prepare the population of the village for immediate evacuation."

"You mean we got to get out of here, tonight, in this storm?"

"I said we would not attempt immediate evacuation, we would prepare for it. As to the storm, this little whirlwind outside is nothing in comparison to the storm that may break here."

ALTHOUGH General Ramsey was a big man physically and mentally, he always felt dwarfed in this control room. The very size of the place was enough to make a man feel small. The size and extent of the operations under control here made him feel smaller. He had dozens of aides, and there were hundreds of technicians always on duty here. Then there was the Map.

This was what they called the three-dimensional replica of the Solar System. A huge thing, it revealed Sol and all the planets in their proper places, plus the four relay ships moving in an orbit around Venus.

In this control room, General Ramsey could direct the efforts of men and machines scattered across millions of miles of space. Microwave ultra radio kept him in instant touch with the entire system.

Reports flowed in to him from hundreds of points. Most of these reports were filtered out and handled by his aides but the top priority reports were always routed directly to him.

"Communications, sir. A Venusian trader on ultra wave."

"Put him on."

"Trader Richard Watkins, sir. I have located groups of Tethanni."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Positive. I have seen them myself, sir."

"How many of them?"

"At least five parties, sir. I counted them as they went along the trail past me. There may be others, but at present I am certain of five groups, with eight to ten *Tethanni* in each group. I observed them by the lightning flashes. They are carrying equipment and are dispersing through the jungle."

"How widely are they dispersed?"

"I don't know that, sir. Perhaps they have fanned out through an area covering several square miles."

General Ramsey cursed silently. Dispersion over so large an area meant that bombing would be largely wasted effort. "Where are they located?"

"They are dispersing into square 5109, space survey map of 2250. Some of them may even be spilling over into square 5110."

"What are those numbers? Repeat them, please?" Ramsey ges-

tured to an aide, gave him the numbers the trader repeated.

"How far are you from Village 371?"

"It's about three earth miles away, sir. Directly south of me."

"Carry on."

The radio went into silence. "Isn't square 5110 where we are putting down that relay ship?" Ramsey asked.

"It is, sir," the aide answered.

"Good. Those *Tethanni* will find a warm welcome waiting for them when they try to establish themselves in that area."

★ ★ ★

On Luna, in the vast enclosure of the transit, men and machines were assembled and ready. An amphibious tank, invaluable in jungle fighting, was at the head of the column. Directly ahead of it was a ramp that led upward to a huge helix that held what looked to be a curtain of golden flame. It was actually a vibration field of an extremely high frequency. It was only a few Angstroms in thickness but it gave the appearance of being much thicker.

This was the field of the transit.

This was the jumping-off place.

On both sides and behind the vibration field was the equipment which controlled the direction of its flow.

Five amphibious tanks and a column of foot soldiers were drawn up in front of the transit. Over

the vast hall, other groups of men and other machines were in position, ready to take their turn at the transit.

★ ★ ★

Near Venus, a relay ship left off circling in an orbit, and dived downward toward the vast cloud banks. After probing with radar beams, the pilot went through the clouds. Tearing up a vast section of jungle growth, the pilot set the ship down on a level area near the northern edge of square 5109.

Immediately, two huge doors opened in the nose of the ship. Inside the vessel, at the top of a ramp leading upward, a curtain of golden flame sprang into existence, the receiving end of the transit.

Out of this curtain of flame rumbled a squat amphibious tank. The cannon on the top glared defiance at the jungle of Venus and all of the creatures in it.

Coming out of the golden flame, following the tank on the run, came a platoon of foot soldiers, in protective plastic armor. They ran down the ramp and into the Venusian night, where lightning lit the darkness.

A flash brighter than any lightning bolt that had ever ripped the Venusian sky tore the night into pieces of brilliant flame.

B — RRRRRR — oooooo —
mmmmmm — OOOOOOmmmm
mm—

The relay ship exploded.

Where the ship had rested a huge hole appeared in the ground. A smashing wave of sound and a ground blast rolled outward. The ground quivered like jelly, the jungle growth twisted and squirmed as if it was being tortured.

The chunks of blasted soil began to fall back to the surface of the planet. In the sky the smashed storm clouds reformed. Again the lightning appeared. It revealed the smashed and battered hulk of the tank, twisted and seared, the cannon barrel sheared completely off, lying on its back a quarter of a mile from the spot where the ship had exploded.

It did not reveal anything about the platoon of foot soldiers.

No fragment of one of them large enough to be revealed remained.



In the control room of the CIC a tiny point of light that marked the position of one of the relay ships blinked out.

The sight was like a live wire touching every human being in that huge place.

"Contact that ship," Ramsey ordered.

"They don't answer, sir," Communications reported.

IN THE basement of Carson's house a group of men were gathered. Ekkard was among them.

As the most important man in the village, Carson had felt it necessary to summon the fat man. Ekkard was breathing indignation and was demanding to know why "the snake and the tramp were not locked up, like they were supposed to be?"

"Because I am a colonel in the Sky Marines and I am in charge of this area. Because Hathor is my very valued assistant, friend, and companion. Are these enough reasons for you?"

"Huh?" the fat man said. His mouth hung open and he looked like he was about to choke.

In the room, the others stirred. Two members of the Judgment Committee were there. They were not looking happy.

"This area is under martial law," Huber continued. "I'm giving the orders."

The members of the Judgment Committee looked even less happy.

"If you want to debate my authority, you will very soon find yourself debating with a division or two of marines," Huber continued. He told them what had to be done.

"But we don't have to get out of here. Our homes are here, our places of business—" Ekkard protested.

"And your graves will be here. I didn't tell you to evacuate, I told you to get ready to evacuate. I'll give the evacuation orders when the times comes."

"And what are you going to be

dong all this time, besides giving orders to people who don't want 'em?" Ekkard demanded.

"Hathor and I are going to locate the relay station of the *Tethanni* transit."

Ekkard looked like he was about to have a fit. "I don't believe there is any such monster as a *Tethanni*, I think this is a great big crock of hot air to turn innocent people out of their homes and places of business, so you can take over for reasons of your own—"

B — rrrr — oooo — mmm —
OOOOOmmmmmm—

The house rocked as the surface of Venus twitched. A gigantic dog seemed to snatch the structure in his teeth and shake it from side to side. Huber had the door open while light was still in the sky and the house was still shaking. The light died out and the house settled uneasily on its foundations.

"W—wh—what was that?" Ekkard panted.

"An explosion caused by creatures that don't exist," Huber answered, closing the door. "Does anyone want to argue further?"

The group was silent.

"Out you go to find that transit relay," Huber said, silently, to Hathor.

Twenty feet of snake went out into the night. Ekkard and the group of humans were silent. A wave of fear, like a cold chill, surged through the room.

"How are you gonna know what that snake finds?" Ekkard asked.

"I have ways," Huber answered.

From outside, Hathor whispered in Huber's mind. "It's cold and dark and wet out here, John. And I sense a *Tethanni*."

"Where?"

"I sense several *Tethanni*, John. The night stinks with them. They're all excited about that explosion—and about something else."

COMMUNICATIONS said, "Relay ship Number Two has ceased reporting, sir. Their identification signal ceased abruptly two minutes after they touched surface on the planet, sir."

"Keep trying to contact them," Ramsey said.

Ramsey's face showed the deep-seated pain that comes from the soul of a man who has sent other men to their death. The big control room was silent. Relay ship Number Two had been put down on square 5112, at a point approximately twenty miles away from square 5109.

"Twenty miles should have been safe, there should have been no *Tethanni* at that distance from Village 371."

"Maybe we accidentally ran into a small party," an aide said. "That ion blast is bad business even in the portable models. At close range, it will knock a hole in a ship. If it strikes a vital part of the ship, that's all there is."

"I know," Ramsey said. "We've got two more relay ships circling

Venus—"

It was obvious to him, and to everyone else in the room, that they had run their nose into a trap. They had hoped to stop the establishment of a *Tethanni* relay station on Venus. They had failed in that. Their next hope had been to bomb out of existence such a station as soon as it was discovered. The *Tethanni* had stopped that move, by locating their relay station in or near a village of humans. Their next hope had been to put down relay ships near the bridgehead the *Tethanni* were trying to establish, and attack it with ground forces.

They had lost two relay ships in this attempt.

Given days, perhaps hours, the *Tethanni* would be so firmly established that months might be needed to blast them from Venus.

If they could be blasted from the planet at all.

"Get Colonel Huber for me," Ramsey said.

"He does not answer," Communications reported.

"**J**OHN, watch out!" Hathor screamed, in Huber's mind.

Huber had already swung his pack to his shoulders, the antennae of the micro wave radio set projecting from it, preparatory to going outside. Fervidly he wished he had back in his possession the gun the sheriff had taken from him. Not that it would do much good but it would at least give

him something to hold in his hand.

Zoom! A round hole appeared in the logs at the top of the basement wall. A bolt of radiance flamed across the room and burned a hole in the concrete wall at the opposite side. Almost instantly a similar hole appeared and a second blast of radiance flamed across the room. Then an ion blast was poked through the hole and the round face of a *Tethanni* was revealed behind it.

"We're caught," Ekkard wailed. "We're caught like rats in a trap. Don't try to resist them. Maybe they'll give us a chance to live. I knew something awful would happen because of that damned snake." Ekkard hastily lifted his hands in the air as another *Tethanni* came through the door of the basement.

It was the *Tethanni* that Hathor had stunned and Huber had slug-ged. He looked very grim.

"Orders are to bring you to Nevvi," he said. "Hope you try to escape."

The humans were herded out of the basement. "They've caught us," Huber whispered to Hathor, in the darkness outside. "From here on, everything is up to you."

"U—p to me? Oh, g—golly!"

Through smashing rain, in darkness that was split by lightning bolts that looked as big as barrels, the humans were herded up the slope. The inhabitants of the village crouched inside their houses, unaware of what was happening

outside. The humans were herded into a building near the top of the slope. There they were taken down a flight of steps.

There Huber discovered not only where the *Tethanni* relay station was located but he also instantly suspected that he knew how it had been established here.

Village 371 was underlaid by a series of natural limestone caves. The *Tethanni* had enlarged and changed these caves. In one big room Huber saw the golden flame of the transit in operation. *Tethanni* warriors were pouring out of it, in full fighting gear, each equipped with tanks of their own special gas mixture, each armed with a deadly ion blast. Warriors pouring across space from Saturn, surging like a tidal wave into the beachhead being established here on Venus! In another room, a second transit was in operation. Machines were coming through here, big ion blasts capable of smashing a city, or a space ship. In another room a third relay station was in operation. Supplies were coming through here. Grunting *Tethanni* stevedores were loading them on carts and moving them away.

Crouching against the opposite wall to keep out of the way of all this activity, the humans moved forward. Just beyond the relay station where the supplies were coming through, the cavern had been widened into a huge single room. There, with aides scurrying around

him, a detailed three dimensional map of village 371 and the surrounding area in front of him, squatted Nevvi, the commander of the *Tethanni*.

Nevvi was big, squat, and he looked tough. When he had finished giving instructions to one of his aides in a sing-song voice, he moved a button on the map in front of him, then looked up at the humans. An expression of sour disgust crossed his face at the sight of them. Then he composed his face in what he thought was a smile.

"Vish one spoken of peece?" Nevvi asked.

"I did," Huber answered, startled. Apparently the *Tethanni* that he had slugged had reported to Nevvi that the humans were interested in something called peace. Was Nevvi interested?

"Vish one has ultra radio?" Nevvi continued.

"He has it. He's the one!" Ek-kard answered, pointed at Huber. "I didn't have anything to do with it. It was him."

"How did you know about the radio?" Huber asked.

"Ve picked up ze signals. But ve could not catch the meaning."

"The words were scrambled," Huber answered. "Only a set with an unscrambling device could give the meaning of the words. Why do you ask about the radio?"

"I vish to contact your commander—to talk of peece!"

"What?" Huber gasped.

"I wish to speak to your general—of preece. Establish radio contact with him!" Do as I say. Ozzerwise—"Nevvi glanced at one of the *Tethanni* who had captured the humans.

The creature smiled. He lifted the ion blast. Huber swung his pack from his shoulder, set up the ultra micro wave transmitter. In response to his call, the voice of the CIC came whispering from the little speaker.

"Huber? Where the devil are you? I've been trying to contact you. I sent down a relay ship as you suggested—"

"So that's what the explosion was," Huber said. Sickness came up in him. He forced it away. "The *Tethanni* have captured me?"

"And they're letting you talk to me?"

"They ordered me to do it. I am in the presence of Nevvi, their CIC. He wants to talk to you, about peace!"

"John, have you gone crazy—"

"I vill talk now," the *Tethanni* commander said. The tiny microphone was quickly handed to him by an aide. "Nevvi, director general of the *Tessanthe* armies now conquering Venus, speaking."

"What kind of a joke is this?" Ramsey's angry voice flared across space.

"It ess no joke. Ve are firmly established on thees world. Zerefore I am authorized to accept proposals for truce. Ve have won. Why fight any longer?"

The gasp of General Ramsey could be clearly heard.

"You 'ave already lost two relay ships," Nevvi continued. "You vill lose the other two if you try to put them down. You cannot bomb us. Ve 'ave located our relay station under a human village. To bomb us, you would 'ave to kill your own people. I vill leave the radio with your man. Call him back in two hours, your time, with truce proposals. Zat is all."

The startled reply of General Ramsey went into silence as Nevvi turned off the transmitter. The *Tethanni* commander stared at Huber. "No *Tessanthe* general would ever hesitate to bomb his own people in order to root out his enemies. You humans are fools." Nevvi spat on the floor. The expression of contempt on his face was mixed with an unmistakable expression of gloating over coming victory.

This *Tethanni* commander had won Venus and he knew it. The fact showed on his face.

IN THE big control room, Communications made frantic efforts to contact the transmitter that had gone into silence. "Colonel Huber does not answer, sir!" Communications reported, again and again.

Ramsey's face was white, as if he had lost a lot of blood. "Am I being bluffed?"

There was no answer from his aides.

He counted off on his fingers what had happened. "I have put down two relay ships and I have lost the ships. I cannot bomb the *Tethanni* because their relay station is located under a human village. What is left for me to do?"

Again there was no answer. Ramsey rose to his feet. He paced back and forth across the control room. "There is one thing left to do," he said.

He began to issue orders.

In response to those orders, one relay ship left off its orbiting and dropped down into the cloud belt of Venus. On Luna, in response to those orders, there was a sudden vast shifting of men and machines lined up to go through the transit.

"There is one other thing I can do," Ramsey said. He pointed a finger at his chief aide. "You are in command here."

"Sir?" the aide said. "What—what is the general going to do?"

"What do you think?" Ramsey answered. As he went out of the control room, he was already taking off his uniform.

THE group of humans was herded to one side of the big cavern. Huber's radio was returned to him and he was instructed to wait for the truce acceptance to come through and to advise Nevvi when it arrived. Directly in front of them an opening in the cave led to the rear of the *Tethanni* relay that was delivering supplies. Huber could see the single oper-

ator at the controls behind the golden screen. He could also see the stevedores sweating as they hauled the supplies out from in front of the screen. The germ of an idea began to form in the back of Huber's mind. A chunk of pipe about ten inches long lay on the floor. He picked it up, looked thoughtfully at the operator of the relay, and knew that the piece of pipe was not enough.

Somewhere out in the night Hathor was very unhappy. His projected thoughts were constantly coming into Huber's mind. "John, these monsters are all around me."

"Clear out," Huber told him. "You can't do any more here."

Gratitude and relief flowed in Hathor's thinking. "Good. I am so glad to be told I can go away. But—"

"But what?"

"But you are still here."

"So what?"

"Only that—"

Huber could sense the writhing of his companion. "Beat it," he urged.

"Those horrible creatures are rounding up the whole human population of this town," Hathor answered. "What do you suppose they're going to do, eat them? No, John."

"No, what?"

"No, I am not going to beat it. You are still here."

Something close to a grin split the leather of Huber's face. "I'm a dead duck," he said. "Sure, they

eat humans. They will eat you, if they catch you. They like snake soup."

"Oh, John."

"Maybe they'll fry you."

"If you don't stop talking that way, you will scare me into nervous prostration."

"Then beat it."

"No. I would never be able to live with myself if I ran away and left a friend in trouble."

Huber grinned again. It was good to know that out in the night, he had one friend, even if that friend was a snake twenty feet long, and unable to help him. He turned off Hathor's thinking and turned his attention again to the relay station, the germ of the idea forming stronger in his mind. Beside him, the girl Jean Carson sat on the floor. She was a mass of wet hair and wet clothes, but if there was any terror in her, it did not show on the surface. Looking at her, Huber decided again that he liked this girl. If they could get out of here—But that was impossible. Besides, he had another idea.

"Want to take a chance," he said to her.

"What have you got on your mind?" she answered.

The others were sitting on the floor. Huber could see the signs of shock on all of them. Even Carson was showing stress. Only Ek-kard seemed to feel somewhat at ease. Muttering to himself, the fat man was watching the activities

in the cavern with considerable interest.

"Both of you listen," Huber said, to the girl and her father.

They listened. A hot glitter came into the eyes of the old spaceman. "But what are you going to do if you get behind that relay?" he asked.

"I'll cross that river when I come to it." Huber broke off as a shout filled the room. A stir followed. A *Tethanni* came in from outside. He reported to Nevvi. The commander looked alarmed.

"John . . . John . . ." Hathor's voice whispered in Huber's mind.

"What is it?"

"Human beings are falling out of the sky!" The *Conver's* voice was filled with fright. "Why didn't you tell me you humans could fly?"

"We can't fly. What the hell is going on?"

"A lot of you are flying down to the ground. I see them. They're shooting before they reach the ground. An awful fight is going on."

"Paratroopers!" Huber thought. Exultation leaped up in him. Ramsey could not bomb this relay station and he couldn't land his own men from the sky!

"These flying humans are not doing much good," Hathor reported. "The *Tethanni* are hitting them with their ion blasts before they reach the ground."

"Listen to me."

"Oh, they just killed that one."

"I want your *thuxion*. I want it

under my control again."

"But, John, any minute these horrible *Tethanni* may find me and I will need it."

"This is an order."

"Oh, all right."

Again Huber felt the *thuxion* flow into him. The force seemed to operate regardless of space or physical obstacles. He felt as if he had suddenly acquired a charge of electricity. Holding the piece of pipe carelessly in one hand, he rose to his feet, moved toward the door that led behind the golden flame of the transit. Jean Crane and her father followed him. They talked to him, earnestly. All the attention in the cavern was centered around Nevvi, who was trying to decide what to do about the flying humans raining from the sky outside.

The three humans stopped beside the door. Huber casually strolled through it. Just as casually Jean and her father took up positions beside it.

The *Tethanni* relay operator glanced at the human, made a sign with his hand for the man to go away. Huber's presence did not concern him. Was he not here in his own cavern with his own people all around him? What could one man do against him?

The *thuxion* of Hathor struck him. A dazed expression appeared in his eyes. Huber moved forward quickly. The piece of iron pipe crunched against the operator's skull.

His skull crushed, the operator fell to the floor.

In front of him, the golden flame of the transit shut Huber off from the sight of the stevedores moving supplies. At the side door, Jean Crane and her father stood guard. They also obscured the entrance. Huber began a swift examination of the transit. Then he was speaking into the radio and a startled voice was answering him.

As the voice on the other end of the transmission understood what he was saying, it grew more startled still.

FOR SOME time, the flying humans gave Nevvi great concern. Those pestiferous humans would try anything! Didn't they know when they were defeated? Were they absolutely without intelligence? Any race with any sense would have given up when the *Tethanni* had established this bridgehead. But not these stupid humans.

They acted as if they had just begun to fight.

Nevvi could not understand humans dropping from the sky. They worried him. However, the reports of his lieutenants indicated the humans were not doing much damage. Their assaults could be handled. Reports from the outlying parties indicated the *Tethanni* were consolidating their position around the perimeter, thus widening the zone of operations and preventing any single bomb from destroying the activity in progress

here.

On the whole, everything was going well. Even if the human commander had not fallen for the truce ruse, thus giving the *Tethanni* time to consolidate their position here, the operation was still proceeding according to plan.

Nevvi permitted himself the luxury of a few minutes of self congratulation. He saw himself rewarded by being made governor of this planet, with all the conquered population under his control. Venus had rich mineral deposits, which *Tethanni* engineers could develop and exploit. There were other natural riches on this planet. But it was being governor that interested Nevvi the most. He liked to have populations subject to him. Even the thought gave him a deep thrill of satisfaction. To conquer, to destroy, this was life!

Nevvi saw the human, Ekkard, gesturing to him from across the cavern, trying to attract his attention. He ignored the man. The stupid fool! That fat human had thought that he would be the governor of Venus! Nevvi spat on the floor. Such stupidity!

Down the corridor one of the stevedores bolting from the chamber where the relay transit was delivering supplies caught Nevvi's eye. Screaming at the top of his voice, the stevedore was running toward him.

"Great Nevvi! Great Nevvi!" The stevedore gestured backward. "Something comes!"

"What comes, you fool?"

Gulping sounds, the stevedore ran across the cavern. Behind him other stevedores were boiling out of the opening like alarmed rats pouring from a hole. They gestured backward.

Something came out of the cavern behind them. It was a huge thing with a long pointing snout, a machine of some kind. The sight of it raised Nevvi to his feet. This was not a machine that should come through the supply relay transit. It was not a machine that should ever come from any honest *Tethanni* transit.

The long tube swung to point at the running stevedore. Flame spurted from its mouth.

Something struck the running stevedore in the middle of the back.

He exploded.

A roar like the crash of thunder pounded through the cavern.

The thoughts of being governor of this planet, fleeing from his mind, Nevvi stared in horrified surprise at the spot where the stevedore had been. One instant the stevedore had been an honest *Tethanni*, bringing information to his chief. The next instant the stevedore had been bits of flesh spattered against the walls of the cavern.

Looking at the machine, Nevvi saw humans running beside it. He also saw the long tube was swinging to point at him.

Nevvi had never seen an am-

phibious tank at close range. But he recognized what it was supposed to do.

He also knew what the humans running beside it intended to do.

Smoke puffed from the mouth of the tube.

The shell struck Nevvi in the mouth, exploding there.

THE light of dawn was filtering through the Venusian sky when the big ship came down out of the mist. It found a landing place in what had once been village 371 but which was now mostly rubble. It dropped ramps, soldiers poured from them. After the soldiers came officers, with one officer in the uniform of a paratrooper striding in their midst.

From the rubble of what had once been village 371 a motley group stirred, to move toward the approaching knot of officers. Some of them were paratroopers who had dropped during the night, others were residents of the village who had fought beside the paratroopers. There was a girl, and a gnarled, knotted spaceman, a man in the ragged garb of a jungle trader, and a trembling fat man, and a snake.

"Glad to see you, General," Huber said, saluting. "But I didn't exactly expect to see you here."

"I stayed back there as long as I could," Ramsey answered.

The two shook hands. Ramsey stared around the ruined village. "I don't see how you did it, John.

They were here, and well established. I just don't understand—"

"If I said it had been easy, I would be a liar. Once I got control of one of the *Tethanni* relays and changed the frequency to that of one of our relay ships, and convinced the aide you had left in charge that I was not out of my head, all he had to do was to pour the machines and the men through the *Tethanni* relay. They came through right inside the *Tethanni* stronghold."

"I know," Ramsey said. "I followed the operation from the relay ship. How was it during the night? There was much we could only guess at."

"It was a bloody business, sir. After we had stopped the *Tethanni* relays and had blasted them out from underground, we had to blast them out of the village. Perhaps a few still remain in the jungle but your mop-up squads can take care of them."

"They can do that," Ramsey said. "But—how did they ever get established here in the first place? Enlarging that cave took time."

"It took help too. And they had it."

"Eh?" The general's face was suddenly grim.

"A man by the name of Ekkard."

Among the listeners, Ekkard suddenly seemed seized by a violent vertigo. He began to shiver, his teeth to chatter, and sweat broke out all over him.

"I didn't have a thing to do with it. I didn't. You're lying. You can't prove—"

"When one of the *Tethanni* burned the boy, after being surprised by the youngster, you tried to blame Hathor for it. Why would you blame him unless you were covering up for somebody else?"

"But—"

"Then you tried to get the Judgment Committee to sentence Hathor to death and to keep me out of sight until later. You knew we were dangerous. You wanted both of us out of the way."

"I didn't—"

"Also," Huber continued, "the tunnels from the *Tethanni* caverns lead both to your store and to your house. Could they have been dug without your knowledge? No doubt you saw yourself becoming a little tin god, a minor potentate, after they had conquered Venus—"

"By God!" The anger in Ramsey's face was a living thing.

"They have something here which they call a Judgment Committee," Huber interrupted.

Grim-faced men from the village were already closing around Ek-kard. They led him away.

A few minutes later, shots rang out.

"This is it, eh, John?" Ramsey said.

"That is it, sir. But I would like you to meet a *Conver*, sir, a native of Venus who has helped us tremendously. Shake hands with the general, Hathor."

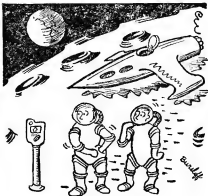
Twenty feet of snake wiggled with delight. Hathor opened his carapaces. A small pipe, the stem bitten through, fell to the ground. Hathor ignored it. Gravely he extended a tentacle.

General Ramsey's face showed signs of strain. But he was a soldier. He took the tentacle and shook it.

"The general is a great man," Hathor whispered, in Huber's mind. "Perhaps you humans are some good in the universe after all."

"Perhaps we are," Huber answered. He was glancing sideways at the girl. He wondered if her voice would again remind him of bells heard far off, the sounds of music in the summer night. He decided that it would.

Hathor, following such thinking, laughed gently, and approvingly, in Huber's mind.



PARIAH

How would you define a pariah? An outcast? One who didn't "belong?" Is it just a matter of rejection? And if so, just what is acceptance? Is it merely a matter of "form," or is it really *conformity*? Only in the land of little red pigs is the black pig a pariah!

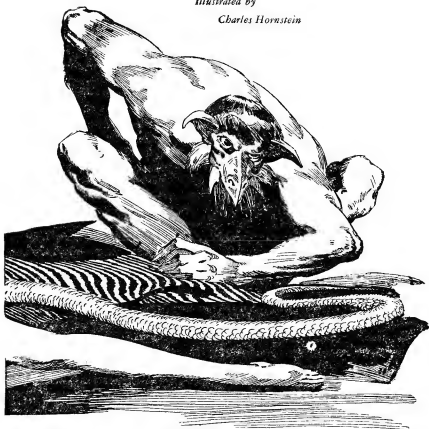


There were many fantastic costumes at the mask ball. Few of them were human. And those that were, consorted with the unhuman—like the lovely girl with the lifelike rubber snake . . . and the man with the demon's head.

ROG PHILLIPS

Illustrated by

Charles Hornstein



"LET'S try that place up ahead," Mary said. "That was a church we just passed. Anyone living that near a

church . . ." Her voice drifted off on a tired note.

"I hope you're right, Mary," John said with forced cheerfulness.

"It's still dark enough so they can't see us too well until we get to the door."

They came to the dirt road leading into the fenced-in yard. John figured out how to unlatch the gate. Every farmer, it seems, has his own patented way of making gates.

A couple of dogs came toward them, barking loudly. One of them stopped barking and came forward to sniff cautiously, then wag its tail; the other kept on barking.

The light on the back porch went on. John and Mary skirted it in the shadows until they came to the board steps. They went up, their shoes making loud noises.

The back door opened as they reached the top step. A man stuck his head out. "Howdy, fo—" His greeting snapped off like a light. His face did things. He swam backward through the air, leaped backward, stumbled backward—all in the same movement. He bumped the door, which then banged the kitchen wall so hard the glass window in it broke.

"Get out or I'll shoot!" his hysterical voice came from the kitchen. He was already on his way to the bedroom to get his rifle.

"We'd better go," Mary said sadly.

"I—I guess so," John said.

They hurried back toward the road. They had gone scarcely fifty feet when the rifle barked. They broke into a fast trot—all they could manage just then. The rifle

barked again.

They didn't bother with the gate this time. John lifted Mary over, then leaped to her side, using one hand. They ran down the road until they were sure they were out of range. They looked back often, in case the farmer got his car and came after them.

The rifle continued to bark, as though its owner was frenzied.

"Maybe he thinks we're still hiding in the yard and is shooting into bushes," John said.

"I don't think so." Mary put an arm around John's shoulders. They walked close together. "He—I think he's just terribly afraid. He's shooting wild. He'll stop when he calms down. We startled him."

"Are you hungry?" John said, changing the subject. "I am. I think I smell carrots up ahead." He slipped through the barbed wire fence, and returned in a few moments with a large bunch of them. They walked slowly, their teeth crunching hungrily into the sweet yellow roots. "Think we should try again tonight?" he asked casually.

"No, John. I'm too tired. Maybe we can find a barn."

"Yes. We ought to get off the road. That farmer may have thought to call the—"

Headlights turned sharply into the road less than a quarter of a mile ahead. With the smoothness of long practice John and Mary melted into the bushes and weeds alongside the road. They watched

when the car went by. It was a highway patrol sedan. They watched its tail lights wink into the distance. They became bright suddenly, then dim again as the car slowed to turn in to the farm house where they had been run off.

"We ought to catch a freight or something," John said. "They'll start looking for us."

At dawn they came to a railroad track. A freight was on the siding.

A train whistled in the distance. It came into view, a streamliner, blurring past them with faces in windows. Then it was gone. The freight started to move slowly.

"I know what line this is," Mary said. "I think that freight will go through the town where I was born."

"You're hungry," John said.

"I'm used to being hungry by now," Mary said. She smiled pleadingly. "Please?"

A string of empty boxcars was passing now. They went down the bank and onto the track the passenger train had gone over. The freight was moving at a fast walk now.

John helped Mary into the open door of a boxcar. When she was safely on, he caught the edge of the door and pulled himself up.

"Made-it," he said lightly. Then he saw what Mary was looking at; a man, badly in need of a shave, wearing a dirty faded blue work-shirt and levis. "Hello," John said.

The man leaped to his feet and ran past them. His feet slid in straw that covered the floor of the car. They went out from under him. He got up and went to the open door, took his eyes off them long enough to see what was outside, then jumped.

Mary looked at John and shrugged cheerfully.

"Well, we have the car to ourselves," John said.

The freight gathered speed until it was going fifty or sixty miles an hour. John and Mary stood at either edge of the open doors and watched fields and towns go past. Then they grew tired of that, sat down side by side, their backs to the wall, where they could still watch.

"I've made up my mind," John said.

"Well," Mary said lightly. "So that was the cause of the long silence."

The cars went over a crossing. John waited until the clatter of the wheels died down.

"Yes," he said. "I've made up my mind. We've had enough for a day or two. Tonight I'm going to steal."

"What do you call what we've been doing?" Mary said.

"That's different, swiping out of farmers' fields. We can't keep it up. We'll get—worms or something. We need a hot meal. Several hot meals. We can get off the freight outside the city in the suburbs and watch until we see a family drive away from home like

they're going to a show or something. Then we'll break in and cook us a nice square meal."

"I'd like to say no," Mary said.

"You're outvoted," John chuckled. "You—against me and your stomach."

"It might be just our luck that *they* were the family that would have taken us in," Mary said—but she didn't sound as though she thought it much of an argument.

"**S**HUT up, Flo," the man said. "You've been drinking too much again."

"I have not been drinking too much, my darling sweet husband," the tall blonde said. "Did you get that? Sweet husband." She laughed hollowly, then added, "And what if I have? What'll you do about it?"

"Maybe I'll do something about this 'sweet husband' business," Harry said. "I'm getting sick of you."

He opened the car door and got out. Flo watched him become a vague shadow on the porch. A screen door slammed. A light went on in the house. She opened the door and slid to the concrete, and went toward the house, staggering a little. She was tall in the moonlight, tall and with a shape. She looked away from the house at the long stretch of lawn and trees as though she didn't like what she saw. She didn't. The nearest neighbor was a city block away—only it wasn't city blocks out here just

beyond the edge of town. Just highway.

She went up on the porch and pushed open the screen door. She came to a stop in the doorway, waiting until the screen slammed behind her. Harry was standing near a window. He was looking at the window.

"Go ahead and do something about it then," Flo said. "I'll like it better that way. A cash settlement and alimony. And a city apartment."

"We've had burglars," Harry said.

"Don't try to change the subject—Huh? Burglars? You're kidding."

The window was open. The glass splinters lay on the rug.

"We'd better see what's missing," Harry said.

Flo went to the little bar and opened it. "Not our stock, thank God," she said, pouring half a water glass of Haig and Haig.

Harry looked around the room, then went into the kitchen. When he came out he looked at Flo and chuckled knowingly but said nothing. She could find the stack of dirty dishes herself.

He went into the bedroom. When he came out he flashed her a malicious grin. "Some of your dresses gone," he said. "You won't miss them. They're those 'old rags' you always talk about. One of my suits is gone too. Why didn't they steal the whole lot?" He turned toward a door at the end of the living room. Over his shoulder he

added, "Oh yes—your mink coat is gone, too."

"So what?" Flo said. "It's insured. Anyway, maybe I wore it tonight and left it someplace. I don't remember."

Harry changed his mind in mid-step and went to the fireplace. He lifted one of the tile, and inspected the floor safe revealed. "Guess they missed this," he said. "Not a scratch on it."

He covered it again with the tile square and went to the door and opened it. It was his office-at-home. Flo watched the light go on inside. She sipped her drink with lady-like daintiness. Harry came out holding an envelope. He looked across the room at her.

"It's a hell of a note," he said. "It makes me mad."

Flo finished the half glass of Haig and Haig in a gulp.

"You make me sick," she said in reference to something unrelated.

"They stole the tickets to the masquerade," Harry said. "Fifty bucks apiece. Now what would they want with tickets to the masquerade?"

"SEND the cab to one fifty-six twenty-two Orange Grove Avenue. Tell the driver not to be startled by our appearance. We're dressed for the Masquerade. That's where we're going. We'll be waiting in front. Too uncomfortable to sit down . . . That's right. Women and their ideas." John

hung up and smiled at the phone. He turned to Mary. "We'll have to hurry so we're waiting when the cab comes. That mink looks lovely on you, Mary."

"Thanks, John. Your business suit looks very well on you too."

"Lucky its owner wasn't the slim type," John said.

They had slipped from the woods where they had been hiding for the past three days, living sparingly on the remains of the meal they had cooked. The woods came right to the edge of the service station. The phone booth was on the border between station driveway and woods. Ideal. They slipped back into the trees and emerged onto the sidewalk well away from the lights. They met no one.

"You have the tickets, John?" Mary said in sudden panic.

"Of course." He felt in his pocket, nodded.

Headlights turned into the street. The light at the top of the car advertised it as a taxi.

"Think he'll be scared off?" John said.

"Of course not. The Masquerade is an annual affair here. I get the home town papers and know all about it from way back. Half the cabs in town will be taking fares more unusual in appearance than us."

To prove it, the cab drew to the side of the road. The driver grinned broadly as he opened the door for them.

"It's wonderful," Mary murmured as the cab sped along a well lighted arterial. "I'd give my soul to be able to walk into one of those shops." She stared at each window filled with female manequins dressed in the latest fashions. She caught John watching her. She darted him a quick smile. "Do you think we'll be happy tonight, John?" she asked. Her smile quirked playfully. "Would you mind awfully if I—flirted a little with someone else? Maybe even let him make love to me?" There was a wistful note in her voice.

"The sky's the limit," John said. "I think I'll pick a blonde. After all, you're a brunette. A man should have something different on his night out."

The cab came to a stop. Other cabs were ahead of it. They formed a line that disgorged couples, few of them looking human. And those that were, consorted with the un-human—like the lovely near-nude girl with the life-like rubber snake . . . and the man with the demon's head.

John tipped the driver when it was their turn. "Hope you win first prize," the driver said.

"Thanks," John said. Mary smiled at the driver and looked lingeringly at his face. She wanted to remember everything that happened tonight. Every detail.

Spectators formed a wide lane maintained by four policemen. John and Mary crossed the sidewalk nervously. They skipped up

the flat marble steps into the building and took their place at the end of the line.

A man in dress suit and a nose that was supposed to look like an elephant's trunk but which looked more like a rope was taking the tickets as the couples went through the door. Each time he took the tickets he turned and handed them to another man behind him. This man had broad shoulders and a square chin. There was a bulge under his left armpit. He would hold the tickets up and squint at them, glance briefly at the couples, nod, and they would go through the door.

Mary leaned close to John's ear. "He looks like a policeman. I was afraid it was too good to be true. Those numbers."

"Can't be helped now," John said regretfully. "We can't run for it, either. Right in the heart of the city. Keep your chin up, no matter what. And keep your hypnotic barrier up full—even if it tires you excessively. We might still fool them."

"Tickets please," elephant nose said, his lips emerging on either side of the rope in a smile of welcome.

John fished out the tickets and gave them to him.

Elephant nose handed the tickets to the other man and put his hand on the door handle in a gesture that implied he would open it for them, but which held the door closed.

Mary and John watched the detective squint at the numbers, then nod. Unbelievably elephant nose was opening the door for them.

Inside, another man pointed toward dressing rooms. "You can check your coats in there," he said.

"I'll meet you over by that statue," John said. "Keep them hypnotized!"

They looked into each other's eyes briefly, drawing courage. Ten minutes later they were together again. "Go all right?" John asked. Mary crossed her fingers and held them up.

A loud voice made them turn.

"What's the matter with you halfwits?" a man at the entrance was shouting. His face was livid with rage.

"It's all right!" the doorman—elephant nose—said loudly. "We've just trapped a pair of famous cat burglars."

"Cats disguised as a bird and a dog?" another voice said loudly. "How appropriate!"

"He was waiting for *those* people?" Mary said. "I wonder if—"

"Never mind," John said, guiding her toward the wide arch leading into the ballroom. "We're in, and safe for now. We'll have all the fun we can while it—" he took a deep breath "—lasts."

"I wonder who will be my prince charming," Mary sighed.

THICK tapering black whiskers were glued individually to Harry's cheeks. A black piece of molded plastic bridged the space between nose and upper lip skillfully. Continuations of his lips reached to his ears, which were covered with pointed extensions. A tail animated by an internal spring construction swept from under his coat gracefully backward. He achieved the effect of a somewhat jaded wolf imperfectly turned into the form of a man. It was a skillful, an expensive job.

He was pacing with wolfish impatience up and down the office off the ballroom.

No less than the chief of police sat behind the desk, drumming his fingers impatiently.

The door burst open. Square-jaw came in, dragging a squirming peacock and a loose-bodied bird dog. "Here they are, Chief," Square-jaw said.

"*Them?*" Harry said, his wolf whiskers quivering with nervous mirth. "Don't make me laugh. We were with them in half a dozen cocktail lounges while it was happening."

"They had the right tickets," Square-jaw said indignantly.

"And the city is going to be sued for false arrest," the limp bird dog snarled.

"Get that damned secretary again," Harry snarled. "She must have made a mistake in the numbers."

Ten minutes later the nervous

female was there with the books and discovered to her horror that she had let her eyes drop down a line from the name to the numbers.

Another five minutes uncovered the proper tickets. And Square-jaw naturally couldn't remember who had given them to the ticket taker. It did prove, however, that the stolen tickets came.

"They'll have the stubs on them," Harry said, attempting a wolfish smile. "Why not announce a door prize? Maybe five hundred dollars. Pretend to draw a number? They might fall for it."

"I'll suggest it to the committee," the chief said.

Harry left the room. At the entrance to the ballroom he paused, his finger touching the black wolf whiskers gently. He surveyed the room, his eyes pausing at each female. His wife Flo, in a Siamese cat outfit, was too prominent. She had a drink in her cat paw, and already there were several men around her. She looked his way. He snarled with his whiskers.

There was Margie with her Peacock outfit that showed her cute fanny. But that would be a waste of a good evening. Besides . . . Harry forgot Margie as his eyes went to the girl.

It wasn't the way she was made up that arrested his attention. It was the way she was standing, alone, the look in her eyes, the expression on what he could see of her face. The wolf in him recog-

nized what it had been searching for.

A damn cute idea in make-up, too. Original and sexy. He touched his wolf whiskers with a gesture, waited until he caught the girl's eyes on him, nodded at her and smiled. He walked toward her. She looked doubtful, then returned his smile with just a shade of nervousness.

"Hello, my dear little girl," he said, leering with over-exaggeration to cover his actual leering. "I'm the Big Bad Wolf."

"Help!" the girl screamed in a whisper. "I would have sworn you were my grandma."

"That was most unkind," Harry said with great dignity.

They looked into each other's eyes. Suddenly they laughed.

"I'm Harry."

"I'm Mary."

He took her slim cool hand and didn't release it. "Want a drink?"

"I'd love one."

The dance band began to play a soft number as they left the floor. Mary paused. "I should dance this one with my—a—escort."

"Why?" Harry said. "Forget it. Remember, you can tell him the wolf dragged you away into the forest."

They had three drinks. Harry debated in his mind the anatomical problems of dancing with her. Then he decided that, since she had dressed that way deliberately, she wouldn't resent an accidental famil-

ilarity or two.

They danced the first number when the lights were turned low. Mary stumbled a little. "I'm not used to drinking," she explained.

"Go to your head a little?" he asked slyly.

Her *mm hm* was a whisper in his ear. He caught her lips with his. They tried to escape, then surrendered.

"Sorry," he said gruffly. "I'm not used to drinking either."

She was looking at him with stars in her eyes. He kissed her again.

"No. I'm not sorry," he said.

"Neither am I, Harry." She rested her cheek against his shoulder. The dance ended on that note.

They went back to the bar. Their conversation was now casual with an intimate casualness. They sat with their backs to the bar, watching other people and commenting on their make-ups.

"I like you, Harry," Mary said suddenly, impulsively.

"Me too," he said. "This is too public. Think we could find some corner?"

"Not just yet," Mary said. "The people. They are so wonderful this night of the year. I want to watch them. Just a little bit more. Do you mind?"

"I heard they're having something new this year," Harry said quickly. "A door prize. I think it's going to be five hundred dollars."

"Oh?" It was disinterested.

Five hundred dollars didn't seem

to interest her. Harry sighed with relief. He had to try it a step further though. "You know, you've got quite a stunning make-up. You may win the first prize."

Her laugh was embarrassed. "I certainly hope not, Harry. I would sink through the floor."

"The door prize wouldn't be bad," he said. "What's the number on your ticket stub?"

Her eyes were fixed on something out in the ballroom. She reached into the pocket in her trunks and brought out a scrap of cardboard, handing it to him.

He read the number and stopped breathing. It was *the* number.

"I'll remember it for you," he said with studied casualness, handing the stub back to her. "Another drink?"

"Huh?" she blinked her eyes and looked at him. "Oh. Yes, another drink, Harry."

He ordered them. He handed her her drink. "Be back in a minute, darling," he said with the right implication. "You won't go away?"

"No, Harry. Hurry back. Please. The evening will be so short."

The little thief, he thought as he hurried away. The dirty little thief. Whatta ya know, a female burglar. And stupid enough not to know that fifty dollar tickets would be registered.

He hurried toward the office to get the police chief.

And she hadn't seemed the type. Not the way he would have imagined a female burglar. She was

more like a girl student in a convent, dreaming for years of an escapade she could hide in her secret memories. But you couldn't tell about women. Take Flo. If he'd only known what he was getting into with her when he got married . . .

He could hear Flo's voice now when she found out. "Ha ha! You picked yourself a mouse and she turned out to be the rat type. And so you wasted the whole evening. What a laugh!" She *would* say that.

He came to an abrupt stop with his hand on the knob to the door to the office.

There was another way. Flo wouldn't have the laugh at *his* expense.

He turned and made his way back to the bar. Mary was where he had left her.

"Back so soon?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"No line waiting," he said, sitting down beside her and taking his drink. "Want to dance again? Or should we . . . ?"

"Let's," Mary said.

"Let's what?" He grinned wolfishly.

"You know . . . Dance."

THE music was loud, but the voices around them were a soft murmur. In the first shadows he swung her around and kissed her brutally. He pulled his head away, still holding her pressed tightly against him.

"You hurt me, Harry," she said softly.

"You liked it?"

"I like this better." She crushed her lips against his, held them there. After a long moment she pulled away with a soft laugh.

"You little vixen!" he said. "You know the score!"

"Not that way," she said. "I—I've dreamed of tonight. You'll never know how I've dreamed. Am I desirable to you, Harry?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes."

"I'll give it to you. I don't know you. You could be a—a gun moll. You could be a fugitive from a convent. You could be the most wonderful woman in the world—or the worst."

"Would it make a difference?"

"No. I want you. No use lying about it. I want every inch of you."

"Then I'm desirable in your eyes?"

"Damn it—yes."

Her voice was husky, dreamy. "I wanted to hear you say it, Harry."

"Why shouldn't I say it?"

The dance ended after a while. Harry caught the eyes of the Siamese cat on him. He smirked. Flo had seen him and Mary kiss. He had wanted her to see. And when he told her he had known Mary was the burglar all along it would be perfect.

He looked Mary over covertly. Her masquerade make-up was still intact. She looked okay. Some-

thing in the back of his mind disturbed him. He shrugged it off.

"One of your whiskers is missing," Mary said. "The glue where it was looks like a pimple." She chuckled.

"Dropped at the scene of the *crime*," Harry said darkly. "That should make the detective mystified. One wolf whisker. Even the great Holmes would have a hard time finding the criminal from that slim clue."

Mary's hand reached into the pocket of her trunks. "Oh dear," she said. "There's another clue. I've lost my ticket stub." She smiled. "But could Mr. Holmes find us from that?"

"He *could*," Harry said. "You see, the number of that ticket is on the books after my name. I bought it."

Just like that.

"Oh!" It was a gasp.

"There's a way out, Mary," Harry said, "The police are here—"

"I know. How did they miss us? That detective looking at the numbers on the stubs. And then he got the wrong people."

"He got the numbers mixed—but he has them right now. I've got a proposition for you. I don't give a damn about your accomplice. We can slip away right now, go to your apartment or room or wherever you live. I'm not a fool. I don't want a phony address. I want to know. Play along with me. We've had too good a time to drop it. Maybe I'm a fool. Maybe I'm

not. I'm crazy about you. I make plenty of money. I can pay your rent and buy your clothes."

"Your wife—"

"To hell with her. We stopped loving each other long ago. She's got a meal ticket. The courts would give her better than that if I tried to get rid of her. She's a mistake. You won't be."

"No, Harry."

"Why not?" he said, surprised.

People were looking at them, so they began dancing. She rested her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Harry," she said. "I—I wish tonight were forever. But it can't be."

"Then it's the police, Mary."

"Blackmail?"

His voice was husky. "Call it that. I want you."

"I think you do. I really think you do. But what if—"

"*Nothing* can change that. A man knows. I'll do everything I can, take every advantage I can. If you think I'm bluffing find out. If I can't have you I'll turn you over to the police. I want you that bad. Look. I'm quite well off. Tomorrow I'll buy you a car. You can drive out in the country, pick out a home you'd like. I'll buy it for you. Or I'll find one for you and take you there. I can buy off your accomplice or you can ditch him. We can be together a while every day."

"You want me that much? My body?" Her voice was wistful.

"You're a funny kid," Harry growled. "Most girls make a pre-

tense of wanting the man to love them for their mind. You seem to want me to be crazy about your body."

He felt her shiver against him. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

He chuckled. "You're going to give in," he said.

Her shivering increased. Then suddenly it stopped. She took his hand. "Let's go up to the balcony, darling." Her eyes were bright with tears. She smiled through them. "I—almost—have hope," she said brightly.

They went up the steps to the balcony. Harry was conscious of Flo's eyes following them. Maybe she'd follow them, but what the hell. Maybe a settlement and alimony was the best solution. To hell with Flo.

They reached the first shadows. Harry tried to keep on, but Mary stopped him.

"Stand where you are," she said. "No, don't kiss me—or yes, just once now." She yielded her lips. Her arms went around his neck. Then she pushed gently away from him. "Stand there," she said. "I want to stand a little way from you. I want you to look at me. I want you to see me—but just in the shadows, for now."

"Okay." He was a man humoring the whims of a woman. And it was easy to humor this one. He could look at her forever. He could—

She abandoned her hypnotic aura.

He turned a livid shade of green. "Oh God!" he moaned. He thought of the moments he had had with her in his arms dancing. He knew now what had been troubling him at the back of his mind. He doubled over and gagged, his stomach doing the erasing his mind couldn't accomplish.

Mary stood quietly, her arms still held out toward him. Her lips trembled. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she didn't cry. She couldn't cry.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said with infinite regret. "I'd hoped. You gave me hope."

He didn't hear her. Still retching, he stumbled toward the stairs, half stumbled down them.

"Police!" he gasped. The band drowned out his voice. "Police!" he repeated. It was coincidental with a pause in the music. His voice carried through the ballroom.

All eyes went toward him, then past him to the head of the stairs.

Mary was coming down. She felt relieved from the terrific strain of holding a hypnotic mental image for so many. Her head was held high. Tears still streaked her cheeks. The band had played a few more notes, then stopped of itself to watch her. The band leader turned to see what they were staring at.

A gasp of horror rose through the ballroom.

John detached himself from the shadows at the far side of the room and pushed gently through

the crowd toward the foot of the stairs. People saw him now, too, as he actually was.

Harry staggered away from the stairs toward the office. Square-jaw, his complexion green, had brought a gun out from underneath his dress suit. He was headed determinedly toward the stairs.

John held out his hand to Mary. A shudder went through the crowd as Mary took his hand.

"I'm sorry, John," Mary said. "I had to spoil it. I *knew*, but I had to spoil it. I thought maybe . . ."

"It's okay, Mary," John said. "We can go back now."

Mary smiled through her tears. "You didn't dance, John. Didn't you want to?" When he didn't answer she said, "You did this—you escaped with me—just for me?"

"Just for you."

They went ahead of Square-jaw. The door to the office was open. They could hear Harry's voice.

"She's an escaped *ATOMY*!" Harry's voice came, shaken and gasping. "God! Can't they keep them out of sight? Can't they catch them when they get out? Why do they *want* to get out? It was like holding a cancer in my hands. She put her arms around me—"

"I don't see how they could have gotten this far from the Atomy Colony," the police chief's voice sounded. "The female was born here. That's probably why . . ."

John held back. "We'd better wait out here," he said. "You won't want to see him again."

"I won't mind," Mary said quietly. "I feel sorry for him now. I think that's what I wanted to find. I found it. I feel sorry for all of them, but especially for Harry. I was beautiful and attractive to him. It's more than just how we look. It's a genetic pattern gone haywire—like cancerous tissue, only we are the visible manifestation of cancer of the human race, cropping out now a hundred years after the first Bomb. The race pattern is infected and *they're* the race. They never know when their children will look like us—or worse. That's what makes them react so. I feel so sorry for them." She smiled apologetically at John. "I guess that's what I had to see and feel. I—I don't feel sorry for *myself*. Not any more. Not ever again." Her hand rested on his shoulder. She said, "We can go *home* now, John, and wait. Some day *we'll* be the race. Some day *we'll* be the accepted ones. I know that now!"

THE END

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POTENTIAL ZERO

By John Bloodstone

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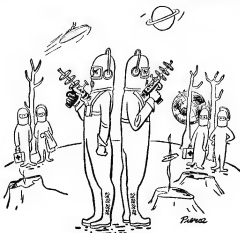
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I write science-fiction because I like to write it. Starting back in 1937, the first story I wrote sold. Now, some odd years and I don't know how many stories later, I still like to write. However, editors being what they are, all the stories haven't sold. Across the years, I imagine the total rejections might run as high as five percent. I also write western stories. There is a kind of a bold challenge about the old west, where a man went in by the skin of his teeth, his wits, his guts, his heart, and a gun, and made something for himself out of a wilderness, that I like. A similar feeling exists in science-fiction, but here the scope is expanded to cover all time and space. We lads on this

end of a typewriter set ourselves about the task of describing the adventures, the feelings, and the thoughts of that very strange and remarkable organism, the human animal, against this vast backdrop.

We dream a few little dreams. To you people on the other end of our typewriter, the readers, we extend an invitation—come join us in our dreaming. It may be that the strength we give to the dream today may in some far future become the blood, bone, and muscle of reality. One thing I hold to be certain, that we cannot build the world of tomorrow effectively unless we dream about it a little today. I hope the dreams I write come true someday!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

John Bloodstone

POTENTIAL ZERO — The Vanyans came from outer space bringing Earthmen invaluable gifts, and Earth received them with open arms. But what was behind it all? What would the Vanyans ask in payment?

Edward Wellen

ROOT OF EVIL — In this case it isn't money, but turnips. Anyway, it caused the vanishment of Wilmer Kootz, in a very surprising way.

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THE BRIDGE — World leader Liddel had Earth at his feet. Why, then, did his thoughts return to World War II, the shelling of Caen, and a bridge? And who was the girl waiting for him in a strangely familiar meadow?

Mack Reynolds

OPTICAL ILLUSION — If aliens from another world are among us, how would we detect them if their disguise is perfect? Well, perhaps, some of us are not perfect humans, and therefore . . .

Richard Dorot

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